

HARRY HARRISON New Editor

SCIENCE FICTION • FANTASY

JAN 50¢ 1968

FANTASTIC

NEW

Hugo
Winner

FRITZ LEIBER

Returns with *When Brahma Wakes*

NEW

DEAN KOONTZ

A DARKNESS IN MY SOUL

plus stories by:

RAY BRADBURY • THEODORE STURGEON • JOHN WYNDHAM • ROSS ROCKLYNN





SCIENCE FICTION • FANTASY

FANTASTIC

JANUARY, 1968 Vol. 17, No. 3

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FOLLOW ME!

The age of the hero has not really vanished. We have become used to military commanders who sit in armored bunkers and do their ordering by radio, their function even reduced to the act of button pusher in the launching of an atomic war. That we still do have real heroes in our midst was proven during the 6 day Israeli war where, on the average, more officers were lost than enlisted men. Because the officers insisted on *physically* leading their men into battle, thereby taking severe losses.

The hero does not shirk his duty. He goes first and leads his men. They follow him because he is a better man. In fiction the hero comes very close to being superman—but does not quite go all the way. The superman is the modern substitute for the gods and demigods of the past, and is a different case all together. The hero is important because he *is* human and he *can* die. He may be bigger than life—but not so big that we cannot identify with him. And when we do, for a few moments, we are bigger ourselves. Experiencing this is one of the better pleasures

to be gained from reading fiction.

This magazine now has a new editor, and with every editor there must come a new policy. I will not seek anonymity under the editorial "we", but instead put my policy squarely on the line. If you like it—tell me so in our letter column. (If you don't—tell me so as well. I may not enjoy what you say, but I'll print it.) I shall continue to print the kind of stories that you have enjoyed in the past. But in addition I intend to print stories of the heroic age—whether this age is in the past or in the future—or in another plane of existence altogether. Stories that move, that entertain, that captivate. Stories that *I* enjoy reading.

There seems to be very little fun left in fiction these days, and I bemoan this loss. I would like to restore some of the fun, the color and the motion that have existed in the past in science fiction and fantasy. I do not mean the old stories rewritten, but new stories by new writers with new ideas—that nevertheless have the attraction of the stories we have known.

THE EDITOR

Editorial by HARRY HARRISON



with inner ***vision...***

**YOU
CAN
DO
THESE
THINGS!**



**LIVE A 1000 LIVES
in One Lifetime**



**SEE WITHOUT EYES
by inner perception**



**SEARCH FOR
THE UNKNOWN
know when you find it**



Please include Your Zip Code

THE ROSICRUCIANS ANONYMOUS
ANARCHIST COMMUNIST FEDERATION

"God is dead," the new theology says, and few are the voices raised in protest. But Fritz Leiber, a Master of Myth and knowledgeable Sage of the Sagas suggests that perhaps He is not dead, just resting. And when He awakes — then what?

WHEN BRAHMA WAKES

By
**FRITZ
LEIBER**

Illustrated by
JEFF JONES



GOD shouldered open the swollen back door and amidst the explosive shower of rust and dust sneaked a quick squint upward.

There wasn't a star or planet in sight. They were all masked by an opalescent gray blanket. An invisible gray thread snaking down to His nostrils informed Him of the blanket's advanced industrial origin—not honest coal smoke so much as the sulphuric stench that was a by-product of the manufacture of plastics, high-grade fuels, and steel.

While the music of the spheres was drowned by a restless, incessant throbbing like the grumbling of a thousand distant dragons and the hissing of ten thousand serpents.

God squared His chin surlily. That was the trouble with meditating on His creation, Zen or no Zen. It gave the Adversary a chance to undo it. He'd dozed off dreaming of a glittering city with silver spires climbing toward a bespangled Heaven and swarms of His happy creatures, rainbow-clad, dancing on the greensward between the skyscrapers. And while He'd slept, the Adversary had devised smog and freeways.

It was a wonder that when He'd originally rested on the seventh day, He hadn't waked on the eighth to find everything redesigned. The Adversary had been sluggish then, but now he was carrying the contest to His very door.

God backed away without closing it. There was an old cloak hanging beside it, and a slouch hat that had seen better days, and a black eyepatch dangling by its worn elastic. God's shaggy white head brushed a large, empty birdcage and set it swinging.

He'd have to re-think this Adversary business very carefully. He told Himself as He turned. Maybe He'd been too quick in letting his cozening creatures woo Him away from gnosticism and convince Him that the Adversary was only a paper devil, who'd crumple and flare to nothing like flash paper on Judgment Day, or the Japanese fleet before Pearl Harbor. Ahriman might be a better name for the Adversary, an evil strong as His own good. In which case He'd damn well better do the Persian again and be Ormazd fast.

A pair of sleazy stretch pants and an old bra hanging on the back of a kitchen chair made Him remember Venus. There was a lot to be said for polytheism, He had to admit, especially when He woke lonely as this. The trouble was He couldn't trust the pantheon, which He had fathered during his Zeus phase, to stick by Him. He had a vivid vision of Venus, last to leave Him, turning in the kitchen door, glorious in her sandals, denims, sweater, long golden hair, and inimitable vase-curves.

"It's been the most, Dad," she'd said simply, "but now I gotta

drift. The beach, Dad. I always had an affinity for surf."

Nor could he trust or find security in any of His mortal creatures. He'd guided them to atomic energy and spaceflight and computers, and then thought He could turn Himself off awhile, at least for this sector of the cosmos—and He'd come back to find them almost unrecognizable: talking a jumble of new scientific and artistic and social jargon (though many of them no longer thought, they dug), haring off after extra-sensory perception, creating brief rainbow microcosms in the inner space of their brains with new alphabet drugs, peering up at quasars rather than stars, tweezering out the molecules of heredity, insanity, sanity—that list was almost endless— inventing languages for machines, reducing ultimate particles to flickering clouds of sub-particles—or wavicles!—devising new human relations by the hundred (they were fantastic social inventors) and new human arts by the thousand.

Of course He could keep an eye on them all the time. He could watch each sparrow fall, each overworked ant collapse from heart failure, each microbe dissolve in the grip of a posse of leucocytes, each unstable atom give up its pale radioactive ghost, each restless particle put on its quick-change act, each idea flicker and die, not missing the one idea in a billion billion billion that

lived. But would that grandiose busy-work bring Him any closer to His Creatures or really keep Him in touch with them? They'd still all go on changing and developing through the cycles of seemingly sterile repetition. And He'd be dead inside.

A scrawny black kitten came mewing at God's shapeless, soft-soled slipper. Well, at least one of His creatures still depended on him. God levered open two triangular holes in a small can, poured the condensed milk into a dirty saucer, set it on the warped floor, and went off to inspect His four rooms.

In the small studio where He roughed out creation, the paints were dry on canvas and palette, the watercolors cracked, the copper plates eaten through by acid.

In the second room, where He recorded His directives—His Word—there was dust on the tapes and from the machine came a faint stale stench of burnt insulation.

In the third room there were cobwebs on His typewriter.

Clearly the Adversary hadn't stopped at the back door. He had invaded and disordered the whole.

He had even invaded His body, God belatedly realized. He was full of aches and pains, His tongue was thick, He had to lean down close to the typewriter to make out what He had been typing on the last sheet.

There was a web just above the paper and a tiny black spider was walking across it. God jerked back. Why the Hell had He ever created spiders? What had got into Him then? For the moment He couldn't recall. It seemed like the end of everything.

But then He reminded Himself that this wasn't the first time He'd been slammed back on His heels. This wasn't the only occasion on which He'd been made to feel small. He became aware of a warm knot of identity deep in His gullet, under His breastbone. The Adversary hadn't invaded *that* and right now that was all that mattered. He still had a mustard-seed of faith in Himself.

His lifting gaze touched a tiny Buddha of once polished, now dust-coated, reddish wood. Maybe . . . no!—look at the trouble the contemplative mode had got Him into. The trouble about Nirvana was He always had to come back from it. No, another time, maybe, but not now.

A chain of association flashed on in His mind, like a zigzag lightning flash. Buddha—those priests drenching themselves with gasoline and setting themselves afire—universal flames—atomic holocaust—the ultimate battle of Ragnarok—the Norse gods—*Odin!* Yes, that was it! It was time that He went out on another anonymous swing, to inspect His creatures and perhaps spot one of the lesser gods here and there. Somewhere along the

line, He'd remember the beach.

He returned to the kitchen and put on the eyepatch—His left eye felt as if it really needed the sleazy thing. He whipped on the slouch hat, pulling it low on his forehead, and swirled the old cloak around his shoulders.

He looked up unhappily at the empty birdcage. He really ought to have His two ravens on His shoulders when He went on His Odin-tour of inspection, but they must have flown away long ago. Someone had probably released them out of mercy—maybe Venus, just before she left. Or maybe He had.

The kitten came purring to his slipper. On a sudden inspiration, God picked it up and gently stuffed it inside his vest. Then He hurried back to the typewriter, delicately caught up the cobweb with the spider on it and laid it on His shoulder. They would have to do for his Hugin and Munin. At least they were both black.

Then God squared His shoulders, tucked His chin against His chest, pushed the back door open wide, and stepped out. He was feeling remarkably cheerful. He'd really make His rounds this time. If he happened on a rocket bound for the Moon, or Mars, or even Midgard, He'd hop aboard.

The back gate was stuck like the back door and had to be forced open. That depressed Him again, but after He'd taken a few dozen steps down the dark alley, He began to feel better. The End

A brilliant new story—by a young man whose first effort, "Soft Come the Dragons," still causes comment wherever soft buffs gather—in which esper Simeon Marflin tries to avert Doomsday by "parachuting" into the depths of a monster's mind—where instead of military secrets he discovers the true nature of God!

A DARKNESS IN MY SOUL

DEAN KOONTZ

Illustrated by JEFF JONES

I WONDER if Dragonfly is still in the heavens and whether the Spheres of Plague still float in airlessness, blind eyes watching. There is no way to find out, for I live in Hell.

Men have asked questions about Time and Space, and some have found answers. But there are questions which should remain unanswered, riddles without tag lines . . .

I am a digger into minds. I esp. I find secrets, know lies, answer questions. I esp. Some questions should go unanswered, but they do not always. And now there is a darkness in my soul . . .

It started with a nerve jangling ring of the telephone.

I put down the book I was reading and answered the stri-

dent mechanical scream. "Hello?"

"Simeon?" He said it correctly (Sim-ee-on).

It was Harry Kirshire. I esped out and saw him standing in a room that was strange to me, nervously drumming his fingers on a simu-wood desk.

"What is it, Harry?"

"Sim, I have another job for you."

He had long ago given up his legal practice to act as my agent.

"Why so nervous? What kind of a job?"

"A mountain of money. That's all I can say."

"More than the mint?"

"More than Midas."

"Say no more."

"We'll expect you here at the Artificial Creation building in twenty minutes."

"I'm on my way." My stomach fluttered. The Artificial Creation Building. The womb.

I slipped into overshoes and a heavy coat. Without Harry Kirshire, I would most likely be imprisoned at the moment — or in what amounts to a prison. When the staff of Artificial Creation discovered my wild talents, the FBI attempted to impound me and use me as a "natural resource" under federal control. It had been Harry Kirshire who had fought the legal battle all the way to the Supreme Court. I was nine when we won the case — twelve long years ago.

It was snowing outside. I had to scrape the windscreen of the hovercar. One would imagine that, in 2004, Science could have dreamed up something to make ice scrapers obsolete.

I arrived at the AC building and floated the car in for a Marine attendant to park. Inside, I was ushered through a door into a cream-colored room with hex signs painted on the walls, a small, ugly child sitting in a leather chair, and four men standing behind him, staring at me as if I were expected to say something of monumental importance.

The child looked up, and his eyes and lips were hidden by the wrinkles of a century, by gray and grave-like flesh. His voice crackled like papyrus being unrolled in an ancient tomb.



"You're the one," he said in dust whispers. "You're the one."

"That's the situation," Harry said nervously.

The child-ancient's eyes squinted out at me like burning coals sparkling beneath rotten vegetation. I could feel the hate consuming there, hate not just for me, but for everyone, everything. He, more so than I, was a freak of the Experimental Wombs. The doctors and supporting congressmen could gloat again: "Artificial Creation Is a Benefit to the Nation." It had produced me, and twenty years later, this warped super-genius. Two successes in a quarter of a century.

"I don't know if I can," I said at last.

"Why not?" asked the uniformed hulk known as General Morsfagen.

"I don't know what to expect. He obviously has a very different mind. Sure, I've espied army staff, the people working here at AC, FBI agents, and I have unfailingly sorted out the traitors. But this isn't the same thing at all."

"You don't have to sort," Morsfagen said. "I thought this had been made clear. He can formulate earth-shaking theories, but each time he fails to give us something vital in it. "We've threatened and bribed," Morsfagen almost said tortured, but didn't finish. "You simply go in his head and make sure he doesn't

hold anything important back."

"How much did you say?" I asked.

"Five hundred thousand pos-creds an hour."

"Double that figure."

"What? That's absurd!" He was breathing heavily, but the other generals didn't flinch. I espied them and knew the child had half-discovered a means of star travel. For the rest of that theory alone, a million an hour was not ridiculous. They gave it to me with an option to demand more if the work proved more demanding than anticipated.

II

The lights had been dimmed; the machines had been moved in.

"The hex signs are part of the pre-drug hypnosis which the physicians must administer. After he is placed in a trance-like state, Cinnamide is hypoed to him."

Across from me sat the child, and his eyes were dead — the sparkling, vibrant glistening gone from them. I had become accustomed to his face, and the dried, decaying look of it did not bother me as much as before. Still, within me was a fear. "What is his name?" I asked Morsfagen.

"Funny, but we never thought to give him one."

I looked back to the freak. And within my soul (some churches deny me one) I knew that in all the far reaches of the galaxy, to

the ends of the larger universe, in the billion inhabited worlds that might be out there, no name existed for the child. Simply, Child.

A team of doctors administered the drug.

"Within the next five minutes," Morsfagen said.

I nodded, looked over at Harry who had demanded to be there for this initial meeting. He was still nervous over the confrontation of the monsters. I turned back to Child.

Stepping easily over the threshold, I fell through the blackness of his mind, flailing . . .

I woke up to white faces with blurred, black holes where the eyes should have been. When my vision cleared, I could see it was Harry Morsfagen, and a strange physician who was taking my pulse and clucking his tongue against his cheek.

"You all right, Sim?" Harry asked.

Morsfagen pushed Harry out of the way, thrusting his face down at mine. "What happened? What's wrong? You don't get paid without results."

"I wasn't prepared for what I found. Simple as that. No need for hysterics."

"But you were yelling and screaming—" Harry started.

"Don't worry, Harry."

"What did you find there you didn't expect?" Morsfagen asked, sceptical.

"He has no conscious mind. It's like a pit, and I fell into it expecting solid ground. Evidently, all his thoughts, or the great majority of them — at least those under drugs — come from what we consider the subconscious."

"Then you can't reach him?"

"I didn't say that. Now that I know what's there and what isn't, I'll be all right."

I pushed to a sitting position, reached out and stopped the room from swaying. Looking at my watch, I said, "That will be roughly seven hundred and fifty thousand poscreds. Put it on my earnings sheet."

He sputtered. He fumed. He roared. He glowered. He quoted the Government Rates for Employees. He quoted Employer's Rights Act of 1986, paragraph two, subtitle three. He fumed a bit more. He pranced. He danced. He raved. He ranted. He demanded to know what I had done to earn pay. I didn't answer. He finished ranting. Started fuming again. But he put it down in the book and stormed out with a warning to be on time the following day.

"Don't push your luck," Harry advised me later.

"Not my luck, just my weight."

When I left, they were wheeling Child out of the room, his empty eyes staring at the ceiling.

The snow was still falling. Fairy gowns. Crystallized tears. I slid

into the hovercar, lifted, and floated out toward the highway. The book was lying at my side, the jacket face down because it had her picture on it. Honey hair. Smooth lips. A picture that disgusted and intrigued.

I turned on the radio and listened to the dull voice of the newscaster. "PEKING ANNOUNCED LATE TODAY THAT IT HAS DEVELOPED A WEAPON EQUAL TO THE SPHERES OF PLAGUE LAUNCHED YESTERDAY BY WESTERN ALLIANCE AND WILL USE IT IF PROVOKED. ACCORDING TO ASIAN SOURCES, THE CHINESE WEAPON IS A SERIES OF PLATFORMS ORBITING ABOVE THE EARTH'S ATMOSPHERE. THESE PLATFORMS ARE CAPABLE OF LAUNCHING LEPROSY-CONTAINING ROCKETS WITH ANTI-RADAR GEAR. MEMBERS OF THE NEW MAOISM SAID TODAY THAT—"

I turned it off. No news is good news. Or, as the general populace of that glorious year was wont to say, "All news is bad news." It seemed like that. The threat of war was so heavy on the world that Atlas must certainly have been experiencing backache. Then there was the super-nuclear accident in Arizona, claiming thirty-seven thousand lives, a number too large to carry any emotions with it. Then the horrible things Artificial Creation labs developed (their fail-

ures) and sent to the freak homes to rot away in unlighted rooms. Anyway, I turned it off.

III

At home, in the warmth of the den, with my books and paintings to protect me, I took the dust jacket off the book so that I might not accidentally chance upon the picture, and I began reading *Lily*. It was a mystery novel in a way. And it was a mystery of a novel: the prose wasn't that spectacular — actually designed for the average mind. Still, I was fascinated. And through the chapters, between the lines of prose, a face seen at a party weeks before kept drifting through my mind. A face I fought to forget . . .

"See her. Over there?"

"Yeah?"

"Marcus Aurelius. Honest. Writes those pornographic novels — or nearly pornographic. You know, *Lily*, *Bodies in Darkness*, *those*."

And she had sweet golden silk hair.

And she was blessed with a sculptured face.

And she had deep eyes of blue. She.

"How would you like to—"

I ignored him, what he was saying about her. I had to ignore!

"Those legs—"

Honey hair.

Smooth lips.

When I had finished, I picked up the phone, clutching the dust jacket in my other hand, my mind remote, as if my body were overpowering my brain. I punched out Information. The operator refused to give me Miss Aurelius' real name and number, but I spied out and saw it as she looked at the book in front of her. MARCUS AURELIUS or MELINDA THAUSER/22-223-296787/UNLISTED.

It had only recently been announced by her publishing company that Marcus Aurelius was a woman. And a woman with a pretty name of her own.

"Hello?"

Summer humming tunes in willows.

"Miss Thauser?"

"Yes?"

"This is Simeon Marflin. You've heard of me, I imagine?" My words seemed not my own but tumbled forth from the mist of my mouth, which I seemed not to know.

She seemed uncertain, but the whisper of her voice said she knew me.

"I have been reading *Lily*. You know, of course, that I have always refused to have my biography written. However, having read your books, I would be honored if we could discuss a volume by you — on me."

There was a bit more said, and it ended with me and this: "Fine. Then I will expect you here for

dinner tomorrow night at seven."

My mouth was dry, and my lips seemed about to crack. I was sweating. I had suggested escorting her to dinner somewhere. She had said dinner was not necessary. I had insisted. She had said restaurants were too noisy to discuss business. I said I had a cook. And now she was coming to my place. I couldn't sleep for worrying about it.

Getting heavily out of bed, I walked into the den. The machine stood in the corner, silent.

The headrest was ominous.

But my nerves demanded soothing.

The chair that folded into the machine was like the tongue of a monster.

I could see the hollow compartment that would swallow me. But my nerves demanded soothing. I reminded myself that other generations never had the advantage of a Mechanical Psychiatrist. They could never have afforded one even if their technology would have made the thing possible. I forgot the emptiness that would fill me later. For the moment, I needed comforting. I needed a few things explained . . .

Proteus Mother taking a thousand shapes.

But never to be caught and held to tell the future . . .

The life spark flickering, then holding a steady flame. And a very vague awareness even in

*the womb where plastic walls
were soft and warm and giving—
but somehow unresponsive . . .*

*He looked up into the lights
overhead and sensed a man
named Edison. He sensed filaments
even as his own filament
was disconnected from the
womb . . .*

*And there were metal hands to
comfort him . . .*

*And . . . and . . . there . . .
and . . .*

SAY IT WITHOUT HESITATION! The voice was everywhere.

*And there were simu-flesh
breasts to feed him . . .*

And . . . and . . .

OUT WITH IT! The computerized psychiatrist had a voice like thunderstorms.

*And there were wire-cored
arms to rock him . . .*

*And he looked up out of swad-
dling clothes . . .*

GO ON!

*. . . into a face with no nose
and blank crystal eyes that re-
flected his reddened face. Un-
moving black lips crooned,
"Rock-a-biiiii bay-beeeee in theee
treeeee (thriddle-thriddle) tops
. . ." The thriddle-thriddle, he
found, was tapes changing some-
where inside mother's head. He
searched his own head for tapes.
There were none.*

GO ON, GO ON!

*And he looked up out of swad-
dling clothes when he esped an
understanding, and . . . and . . .*

**DON'T HESITATE! YOU'LL
BE LOST.**

I don't remember.

YOU DO.

No!

YES. YESYESYES. The ma-
chine touched part of his mind
with electronic fingers. **I CAN
MAKE THE MEMORY EVEN
SHARPER.**

No! I'll tell.

TELL.

*And he looked up out of swad-
dling clothes when he esped an
understanding, and his first . . .
words . . . were . . .*

GO ON!

*His first words were these: "My
God, my God, I am no human!"*

**FINE. NOW RELAX AND LIS-
TEN. YOU KNOW THAT THE
"HE" IS REALLY YOU. YOU
ARE SIMEON MARFLIN. HE—
THE HE OF YOUR ILLUSION—
IS SIMEON MARFLIN. YOUR
PROBLEM IS THIS: YOU ARE
OF THE ARTIFICIAL WOMB.
YOU WERE CONDITIONED
FROM CONCEPTION TO HAVE
HUMAN MORES AND VALUES.
BUT YOU CANNOT HOLD YOUR
MANNER OF CREATION UP TO
THE LIGHT ALONGSIDE YOUR
MORES AND ACCEPT BOTH.**

**YOU ARE HUMAN, BUT YOUR
MORES TEACH YOU TO FEEL
THAT YOU ARE STRANGELY
LACKING IN HUMAN QUALI-
TIES.**

*Thank you. I am cured now.
I have to leave.*

NO. The machine was firm.

THIS IS THE THIRTY-THIRD TIME YOU HAVE HAD THIS SAME ILLUSION-NIGHTMARE-DREAM. YOU ARE NOT HEALED. AND THIS TIME I FEEL MORE BELOW THE SURFACE OF THE DREAM. TELL ME.

There is no more.

TELL ME. The bonds on the chair were tight around arms and legs.

Nothing.

A WOMAN. THERE IS A WOMAN. WHO?

An author I have read.

AND MET. TELL ME.

Blonde. Cat's eyes. Ruby lips.

I—

SOMETHING MORE.

Ruby lips.

NO. SOMETHING ELSE.

Let me the hell alone!

TELL ME. It was the voice of a king.

Breasts. No, I—

I KNOW. I SEE IT NOW. YOU LOVE HER.

No. Disgusting.

YES, LOVE. YOU LOVE HER, BUT YOU HAVE THIS COMPLEX . . . SIMEON, DO YOU REMEMBER THE SIMU-FLESH BREASTS?

I remember.

THIS HAS COME TO SYMBOLIZE YOUR INHUMANNESS TO YOU. YOU WERE NOT SUCKLED LIKE A MANCHILD. THIS MAKES YOU AFRAID OF WOMEN, OF—

No. I'm not afraid. She was

just . . . just . . . disgusting.

NO. NOT DISGUSTED. YOU ARE AFRAID, NOT DISGUSTED. YOU BACK AWAY FROM ALL YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND IN LIFE. THIS IS JUST ONE PART. YOU BACK AWAY BECAUSE YOU CANNOT SEE WHERE YOUR PLACE COULD LIE IN IT ALL. YOU SEE NO MEANING IN LIFE AND YOU ARE AFRAID TO SEARCH FOR ONE, FEARING YOU WILL EVENTUALLY DISCOVER THERE IS NO MEANING.

May I go?

YES. GO AND DREAM NO MORE OF PROTEUS MOTHER. YOU WILL DREAM NO MORE, NO MORE.

After every session with the machine, I was drained, lifeless. I made my way to the bedroom and collapsed onto the mattress without undressing. I tried to encourage pleasant dreams of Marcus Aurelius, about soft arms and diamond eyes. But somewhere, a voice far away said, "You're the one." Chains dragged across a stone floor, ancient paper crackling . . .

IV

The next morning there were rumors of military disturbances along the Russian-Chinese border, and news dispatches from the scene said that Western Alliance troops had met in brushfire

contact with the Orientals.

The new Chinese horror weapon circling the planet had been named Dragonfly by the press.

I paid no attention. Thus it had been since I could remember. And if it is still thus (I would not know), leave it alone and do not question the validity, the reason of it . . . There is darkness for an answer.

Outside, the city crews had finished cleaning up the snow. The streets were bare, but the buildings and trees were smothered with whiteness. Fences were delicate laces. Trees and shrubs were icicle candies. It was as if Nature, via a snowstorm, had tried to reclaim what had once been hers but was not lost to her forever.

Clouds, heavy and gray, betrayed the advent of yet another storm. I passed by the smouldering ruins of a church that had burned overnight.

At AC the hex signs were on the walls, the lights were dim, and Child was tranced. "You're late," Morsfagen said.

"You don't have to pay me for the first five minutes," I snapped. I slipped into the chair opposite Child.

"You're sure you want to continue this, Sim?" Harry asked.

"Quite," I answered and was immediately ashamed at having cut Harry short. It was the atmosphere of the place. So damned military. And Morsfagen. Like Herod — trying to destroy the

Child. And I was on edge for another reason; there was a certain dinner guest . . .

This time, I *parachuted* through the emptiness of his consciousness, not flailing . . .

Labyrinth.

The walls were hung with cobwebs, the floor with dirt and bones. Far down there, somewhere in the nova-like center of the mind was the Id. It gave out the same, nearly unbearable whine that all Ids do. And somewhere above, in the blackness, was the area where the conscious mind should have been. It was clear that this mind of the super-genius was strangely unhuman. Most minds think in disconnected pictures, but Child's created an entire world of its own, a realism within his mind.

There was a clacking of hooves, and from the source of light at the end of the tunnel, came the outline, then the form of the Minotaur, nut-brown skin and all textures of black hair, eyes gleaming.

"Get out!"

I mean no harm.

"Get out, Simeon."

There was a bluefield of sparks crackling above his head, and psychic energies shot thin, spodic flames from his nostrils.

"Leave a monster his only privacy!"

I too am a monster.

"Look at your face, monster. It

is not wrinkled like a dried fig; it is not old beyond its years; it is not caked with the dust of centuries. You pass for human. You pass, at least you pass."

Child, listen, I—

He charged and grasped at me with hoof-hands. I fashioned a sword from my own fields of thought and smashed him broadside on the head.

And he was gone, a vapor in the darkness, a phantom.

Holding the green glow of the weapon, I advanced slowly down the twisting corridors, toward the inner part of him where his theories would bubble, where thoughts would run rampant. I came out finally on an earthen shelf above a yawning pit. Far below, eternities away, drifting and glowing, was a circular mass, and the heat in my face was great.

I reached out and grasped for anything, a sub-current, a cracked image, the shell of a daydream, and I caught a Hate River, ebbing and flowing. HATE, HATE, HATE HATEHA TEHATEHATE - HA - TE - HATEHATE. Somewhere in the middle of it, a two-headed thing swam. I caught the "T" in HATE and traced it along the currents, searching. T To Thumb and a sucking . . . and The sucking suddenly To brown nipple and and moTher's breast . . . and again The T dominated . . . and I allowed the river to carry

me inevitably on toward Theorem.

Theory Though Ts . . . Through Thousand Times Tedious Tiring . . . Ten Times one Times Two to Sub-ough T-seven in drepshler Tubes now being used . . .

The flood was too fast. I could see the theory, but I could not divert it fast enough toward the ocean in the distance where a waterspout whirled (taking the thoughts to the little bit of conscious mind he possessed). The thoughts that were now being spoken in dust whispers in a room far away — the thoughts being recorded while serious men with serious faces listened, seriously.

Then the drug must have finally taken hold, or I would have been swallowed alive. The two-headed beast had swum near without my noticing, and it caught my eye as it moved swiftly, its mouth gaping, a giant cave that drooled . . .

I lifted my sword as it raised its huge head above me to strike. Then there was a sudden, jerky slip like an old movie reel that has been spliced, and everything went into slow motion. It was like an underwater ballet. It would have taken the beast's jaws an hour to reach me, and I slew him as his red eyes glistened, and as a strange THRIDDLE-THRIDDLE came from his throat. Or hers.

Turning back toward the river, I directed thoughts toward the slow-moving waterspout until so much time had passed that I thought I had better get out before I lost my own character identity.

There were steps up . . .

V

The candlelight gleamed in her green eyes, glinted from the hair that fell over her bare shoulders, sparkled on the sequins of her high-collared, sleeveless Oriental sheath.

"I would want nothing held back."

"Nothing," I assured her for the tenth time.

We sipped the wine, but I felt giddy without it.

"All your feelings toward Artificial Creation, towards the FBI, towards all those who have used you."

"That could be a blunt book."

"Anything watered down would be a flop. Believe me, sensationalism sells a book."

I remembered some passages from *Bodies in Darkness* and smiled.

She stood and walked to the plexi-glass view deck that looked out over the Atlantic. The moon was high. She was quite beautiful, flushed with its light.

I walked over, forcing myself to be calm, and stood beside her . . .

"I keep thinking of Dragonfly," she said, her eyes on the stars.

I looked up into the black velvet and watched one, lonely cloud drift toward the horizon, gray against the purity of the Stygian sky.

"Why do people like the ugly?" she asked suddenly. "There is all that beauty, and they try to make it ugly. They like ugly movies and ugly books."

"Perhaps, in reading about the worst parts of life, the darknesses, the grays, the dirt, the terrible things in reality seem more tame, more easily lived with."

Her lips were like cherries . . .

"What do you think of my books — truthfully?" she asked, turning to face me.

I was thrown off balance. "I—"

"Truthfully."

"You mean . . . the ugliness in them?"

"Yes. Exactly." She turned back to the ocean. "I tried writing beautiful books about sex. I gave that up. It's the ugliness that sells." She shrugged those heavenly shoulders. "One must eat."

I was overly aware of the tightness of her bodice.

With the soft glow light melting over her face, I felt the urge to clutch at her, to hold on, to kiss. But I had to fight that! Kiss. No! And I began pacing the room, looking for some solid object to grasp.

She turned and looked at me curiously for a moment. Then she crossed the room, placed a soft, dove hand upon my lips. "It's getting late," she said, suddenly withdrawing the slim hand with the red nails. "Starting tomorrow we tape all interviews." And she was gone in a whirlwind of efficiency that left me standing with my drink in my hand and my "goodbye" in my mouth like a lump of used lard.

I went to bed to dream.

I woke up needing comfort, a strange comfort I could find but one place.

IT IS FOUR O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING. The metal head shrinker said.

I know.

RELAX AND TALK.

What should I say? Tell me what it is that I should say to you.

START WITH A DREAM IF YOU'VE HAD ONE.

I always have one.

THEN START.

There are storm clouds in the sky, dark, thick, mysterious. There is no place where the sun shows. Below all this grayness, there is a hill, a large, rounded hill formed by nature into a grotesque, gnarled lump, a blemish upon the face of the earth. There are people...

GO ON.

There are people...

... and there is a cross . . .
FOCUS ON THE CROSS. WHAT DO YOU SEE?

Me.

YES?

Nailed. Blood. White, festered wounds dribbling rusty blood around the edges of little holes, neat little holes like the cavities left when you rip the buttons from the faces of rag dolls. Rusty blood.

WHO IS IN THE CROWD?

Harry is weeping.

WHO ELSE?

I'm thirsty.

THEY WILL GIVE YOU WATER SOON. NOW WHO ELSE IS IN THE CROWD?

Morsfagen is casting dice for my cloak. And over there is a pregnant woman who . . .

GO ON, PLEASE.

I look at her belly . . . and . . . there . . . is Child. He's weeping too. And I'm weeping. Child wants up where I am. He wants out of her womb and up there before it is too late . . .

DO YOU SEE ANYONE ELSE?

Oh, no! Oh, my God, my God.

WHAT IS IT?

No! You'll spoil it/me! I cannot! Don't you see my station, my purpose? It must be my purpose! I have no other! Get away! No!

WHAT IS IT!

Melinda. Floating, naked. Floating toward the cross. No! Stay away! Stay away! My purpose!

STOP IT.

Help! Help me! Don't you touch me, not you. You're naked, naked, naked! Stop her!"

SNAP OUT OF IT! STOP DREAMING!

I—

QUIET. COMPOSE YOURSELF. I WILL INTERPRET YOUR DREAM. THOUGH I MUST SAY THAT THIS THROWS A NEW LIGHT ON YOUR PSYCHE.

DO YOU SEE WHY YOU ARE THE ONE ON THE CROSS? NO NEED TO ANSWER. YOU SEE YOURSELF AS CHRIST — WHAT A NEW ANGLE! — MORE PRECISELY, AS THE SECOND COMING. THERE ARE PARALLELS, OF COURSE. YOUR VIRGIN BIRTH, FOR EXAMPLE. AND YOUR SUPER-HUMAN POWERS. YOU WERE NOT ABLE TO SEE A PURPOSE TO YOUR LIFE, SO YOU CHOSE TO CAST YOURSELF IN THE ROLE OF A SAVIOUR. IT SERVES A DOUBLE PURPOSE: FIRST, IT REINFORCES ALL YOUR CHRISTIAN MORES AND VALUES THAT YOU WERE TAUGHT AT AC FROM BIRTH; SECONDLY, IT GIVES PURPOSE AND MEANING NOT ONLY TO YOUR LIFE BUT TO THE WHOLE UNIVERSE WHICH SOMETIMES SEEMS CHAOTIC TO YOU — THE WARS AND ALL.

I am thirsty.

IN A MOMENT. YOU SEE MORSFAGEN CASTING DICE, FOR HE DESPISES AND ONLY

USES YOU FOR HIS OWN BENEFIT. THE CLOAK SYMBOLIZES YOUR LIFE. THERE SEEKS TO BE A HINT OF THE FUTURE IN YOUR DREAM HERE, AND YOU SHOULD BEWARE THE MAN.

Go on.

YOU SEE CHILD AS A THREAT TO YOUR NEATLY BUILT THEORY. HE IS ANOTHER VIRGIN BIRTH. YOU REALIZE THAT HE HAS BUILT THE SAME SECOND COMING THEORY TO EXPLAIN HIS OWN LIFE PURPOSE. YOU UNDERSTAND THAT SINCE HE HAS MET YOU, HIS LIFE PURPOSE HAS BEEN SHATTERED AND HE IS HUNTING FOR ANOTHER ANSWER. YOU DON'T WANT TO HAVE TO DO THAT. YOU DON'T WANT TO HUNT.

THE WOMAN, MELINDA, IS ALSO A THREAT TO YOUR PURPOSE (OR RATHER THE FANTASY PURPOSE YOU HAVE CREATED FOR YOURSELF). CHRIST COULD NOT FALL PHYSICALLY IN LOVE WITH A WOMAN. BUT YOU HAVE. ADMIT IT. THIS IS YOUR PURPOSE IN LIFE. LISTEN AND KNOW THAT YOUR PURPOSE IS TO LOVE AND COMFORT — AND BE LOVED.

Could that be a purpose?

IT IS THE OLDEST PURPOSE. WASH YOURSELF CLEAN OF FALSE PURPOSES. THE REASON YOU LIVE IS TO LOVE. DON'T SEARCH FOR LARGER

MEANINGS, FOR THE WHY OF THE WORLD OR THE REASON IN HATE AND WAR. BE SATISFIED THAT YOU NOW KNOW YOURSELF. IT IS A WISE MAN WHO KNOWS HIMSELF.

VI

I slept well, waking refreshed at about ten o'clock. My insides felt warm and free — as if a large, cold chunk of frozen emotions had been melted within. It was freedom for the first time in a lifetime! The machine was much more than the name Mechanical Psychiatrist implied. It was David with his harp, talking of dreams.

I went to AC only for money this time, not to demonstrate my super-humanness, my wild talents. With a few more paychecks in my pocket, my Melinda and I could be vagabonds for an eternity — escaping the ugliness, the filth.

I parachuted from the hex room down into the labyrinth, not trusting to stairs that might have been there yesterday and not today . . .

There was a clacking of hooves on rock.

There was an outline like a child's scrawl, not so definite, not so real as the day before.

An indefinite form with a vague odor of musk and all textures of dark hair that fell like night mists.

"Get out!"

I mean you no harm at all.

"And I wish not to harm you. Get out."

Yesterday I fashioned a mighty sword from the very air itself. Do not forget that.

"I beg of you to leave. You are in danger."

From what?

"I cannot say. It is in the knowing that the danger lies."

I swung the sword, and he dissipated into an eerie blue vapor that clung to the walls until the wind whistled in to blow it away.

Two hours into the session, as I was sprawled on the dirt shelf above the pit, grasping at thoughts and diverting them toward the waterspout, a "G" drifted out, and with another level of my mind, I grasped at it and traced it. G to Grass . . . which is dark Green and bendinG over the hills . . . toppinG the hills to see GGGGG . . . G . . . G . . . God God God God God God like a whirlwind moaninG and babblinG over the Glens, cominG, cominG, twistinG relentlessly onward toward me . . . G . . . G . . .

I reached out to take a stronger hold on the thought progression. Suddenly, the earthen shelf gave way, plunging me downward toward the flaming pit below.

Wind lifted me toward the river. I flew as if I were a kite.

The river swept me toward the ocean.

The water there was choppy and hot, and at places steam rose in spirals like smoke snakes.

At places, ice floated, dying.

I fought for the surface, trying to stay on top of the current, giving up thought direction, fighting only, fighting desperately for my own mind. Then I was suddenly up and splashing through the pillar of water that roared into the black, heavy sky; like a bullet out of a rifle, was I. Splashing, spinning, sputtering, I showered out of the mind of Child.

The room was dark. The hex signs glowed on the walls, partially illuminating the serious faces set in strange grimaces.

"He threw me out," I said in the quiet.

Everyone turned to stare at me.

"He just threw me out of his mind."

VII

Rumors of war.

The Chinese had slaughtered the skeleton staff manning the last two embassies in Asia. Pictures smuggled out showed headless bodies.

Headless bodies on the Tri-D screen.

The Pentagon announced the discovery of the Bensor Beam, which shorted out all synapses in the human body, leaving the

brain imprisoned in a mindless hulk. Named after Dr. Harold Bensor, the beam was already being referred to (by Pentagon officials) as "the turning point in the cold war." I knew the idea had come from Child; I recognized it — the way one recognizes a bad dream that is made into a movie. But the censors had learned from mistakes they had made with me; the public would never hear of Child.

I wondered for a moment what kind of man this Bensor could be to want his name attached to such a device.

Pictures on the screen showed two Chinese prisoners on whom the weapon had been used.

I pushed breakfast away from me, unfinished, and got my coat from the closet. I was to meet Melinda at her apartment for another day's session. She had a ton of equipment there and preferred not to move it. That evening, we were going to the theater — and that was no business meeting! I was heeding the Mechanical Psychiatrist's advice, trying to persuade myself that it had been correct.

The sky was gray again and whispered snow. It was a regular old-time winter, a Christmas card sort of winter, sparkling and white. Somewhere, far above, floated Dragonfly.

"Did the FBI mistreat you at any other time?" she asked.

The black microphone dangled above us like a bloated spider.

"It was not the FBI so often as the doctors who treated me not as a human being, but as something to be pricked, punched, and jabbed at. I remember once—"

"Keep remembering," she said. "That's enough for one day. Besides, you said you had to leave by three o'clock. Sounded very important."

I remembered Child. "Yes. Yes, it is."

She was wearing a peasant blouse with a scalloped neckline, and I found myself staring and thinking. And that in itself was a shock. It did not seem as disgusting as before. In fact, the fullness, the roundness seemed quite attractive. Perhaps my Mechanical Psy had been correct.

"I must hurry now," I said. "I'll be late."

"Then seven this evening," she said, her eyes picking up the overhead light and glittering like two, blue gems.

"Yes. Certainly, yes."

She kissed me when I left! She put two small hands around my neck and put her lips on my lips. I lost memory of the sixty seconds or so following that.

I stood in the driveway a time before I managed to think enough to get in the car. And I sat in the car a time before I managed to think enough to start it. My

mouth burned where hers had touched it.

It burned all the way to AC.

I was in love. No question about it. I hadn't even espied her since we'd met, and that in itself was unusual. I imagine I had been afraid at first that she would love me — and later, that she would not.

"That's Marcus Aurelius. She writes all those pornographic novels, or nearly pornographic. Lily, Bodies in Darkness, those."

Honey hair.

"How would you like to . . ."

I ignored what he was saying about her.

Soft lips.

"And those legs . . ."

Blue, blue eyes.

"Hey, she's looking this way."

Smooth, lovely shoulders, a graceful, curved neck.

"Hey, she's looking at you. That girl's looking at you . . ."

Honey hair smooth lips smooth hips blue eyes lovely neck lovely legs blue eyes blue eyes blue eyes . . .

"Hey, where you going, Sim? You can't leave yet. What's the rush. Hey. Hey!"

How foolish I had been at that party. But that was long ago now. I was so much younger then — and I'm older than that now.

By the time I reached the government building, I had made the

decision. I loved Melinda. I feared Child. He could throw me out—perhaps he could swallow me up. There was something to his warnings to leave his thoughts alone. Something to do with the *G* association I had chanced upon—something to do with God. I loved Melinda. I would never again risk my mind; I would always save it to contemplate her beauty. I would tell them first thing. The job is ended; go in peace.

But it didn't run that smoothly.

They were waiting when I got there. Harry fidgeted nervously with his hands. I thought that I had never seen him as he had been the last few days—and especially as he was now. There were bags under his eyes; the old tick had reappeared in his left cheek; his hair was uncombed.

I esped to see what was troubling him.

It was floating on the surface of his mind, and the thought symbol his psyche had given it was a bloated body floating in a pool of blood. Beneath the image, I read it: WAR. The rumors were not just rumors anymore. Brushfire stuff had gotten hotter. Some Asian pilots had tried dropping a few plague bombs off England, covered by one of their newer inventions, a low altitude radar distorter that Harry did not understand. WAR. A bloated black body floating . . .

Extremely shaken, I sat down

at the table and looked across the shiny surface at Morsfagen. There were tiny beads of perspiration on his chin and forehead. Damn them! Damn them all! Trying to kill Melinda!

"What have you come up with overnight?"

"Nothing more than yesterday," I said. "He threw me out because I was reading some thought stream he did not want me to see. It was easy for him because I never expected it. No one else could ever do it, and it was a new sensation. Rest assured that it will not happen again."

Damn them all! I *had* to go in now, to save my Melinda.

"You're sure?"

"I'm certain. But some steps must be taken before I can go in again. He* must be told that I refuse to continue the experiment, and that you must continue without me. After he is drugged, I'll go in and delve into him secretly. He won't even know I'm there."

A black, bloated body (Melinda) floating . . .

Damn them to Hell!

"Are you sure, Sim?" I thought Harry sounded as if he wanted me to quit. But now that I knew the world and my Melinda teetered on the brink of a chasm much darker than Child's mind (as I then understood it), I realized the only person who could develop the ultimate weapon (the weapon

that would make war obsolete) was Child. He could invent the weapon that would nullify all weapons. I had to go in until he formulated it — possibly urge him into formulating it.

The world was heavy on my shoulders, and Death was walking with me . . .

VIII

Like a cat with cotton feet, I went quietly . . .

Like a ghost in an old house, I went without form . . .

Like the breezes of spring, I walked softly . . .

There was no echo of my steps, and the labyrinth was warmer than usual. I rounded a bend and saw the Minotaur. He was sitting on his haunches, unaware of my presence. He was reading a leather-bound bible.

Slowly, to disturb nothing, I passed. He never looked up.

Pasiphae, here is your unholy child.

Minos, your labyrinth is ugly.

Theseus, keep your weapons girdled to your hip, for there will be no killing of a sad Minotaur.

The pit was a tangerine orange, pulsating warmth flowing out of it. The center was a white hot dot.

I reached out and grabbed the nearest thought. A weapon. Nothing that could serve my purpose, not the ultimate weap-

on that would make war impossible.

A formula to cause rat-like mutations in unborn babies . . .

A beam that could dehydrate living tissue . . .

Many of the G association thoughts, several different progressions that led toward one distant point . . .

. . . An inordinately large number of them.

Then I found it. A stray thought. An ultimate weapon.

F . . . Field . . . Force Field capable of stopping all entry by anything, including air, permitting neither bombs nor bacteria passage . . . Field . . .

I latched onto it and gently nudged it toward the main stream, toward the waterspout. The ultimate weapon — the weapon to make weapons obsolete.

I thought I was being subtle, but I was underestimating Child.

There was a clacking of hooves behind me.

"Get out!"

No. You don't understand.

"You don't understand!"

He pounced. I stepped quickly aside, struck at him, and sent him falling over the brink into the pit . . .

Far out at sea, the Force Field Theory was being shot up the waterspout. Soon, it would be spoken in a dark room.

Sighing, I turned to go. But, with a low, animal grumble, the walls of the labyrinth began to

sway, the floor shook, bucked.

From somewhere down in the pit, there was a scream, a deafening scream that spread throughout the caverns, echoing and re-echoing. Clutching the edge of the pit, the Minotaur was pulling himself onto the earthen ledge. I could see it was not he screaming.

"What is it!" I yelled above the noise.

His eyes were wild. He opened his mouth, and I watched horrified as snakes came slithering out.

I kicked him. He fell back into the pit, all the way to the churning bottom this time.

When I turned back to the caverns, the ceiling caved-in in front of me. Dirt and stones spilled over my shoes. And there was no longer an exit. I wasn't going to get out! I turned to the sea, and I saw the waterspout dying, withering. There was no hope in that direction either. No hope! And the situation was so ironic; like Jesus finally sealed in his tomb. But I had given up that delusion!

"What for crissakes is going on?" I yelled above the constant screaming from the pit. Then I thought of catching a stray thought. I reached out into the turbulent river, and I found them all starting the same way:

G . . . G . . . GGGGGGGGG . . . leadinG to Grass rollinG over the hills . . . to G . . . G . . . GGG

God God God like a tornado whirling across the Glen, relentlessly . . . GGG GGod GGODGO DGOD . . . randomly what purpose . . . trap him like the wind to find a purpose . . . GGG . . .

I realized it. Child's purpose in life had been shattered when he met me — just as mine had been shattered when I encountered him. He could no longer be the Final Coming, the virgin birth. But he had no Mechanical Psy to treat him and could find no woman to love. He had to search for an answer.

GODDGOD GOD GOD . . . trapped in a cavern to tell answers . . . GGG . . .

I followed the thoughts to their end; I was swept along with them. I never should have listened. It was the ultimate theory, and he had proven it. Proven it beyond a doubt . . .

He had tried to contact God. He asked what meaning there could be to life, to the world.

And he was answered; he solved his problem.

He asked what was at the center of creation.

And he found out . . . (oh, Melinda . . .)

And now I'm trapped down here.

*There are three of us.
Child, Simeon, and God.*

And we are all three quite insane.

The End

RESERVATION DEFERRED

By JOHN WYNDHAM

Ghosts have changed since we were young. These days they (the female of the species anyway) have discarded the old-fashioned, unflattering shroud for bra and panties, and now wear nail polish and kiss-proof lipstick. And where the old-timers still cling to tradition, today's ghost wouldn't be caught dead rattling chains and screeching in attics on stormy nights.

Take Virginia, for example. You couldn't ask for a more attractive ghost. Yet even she was much too worldly, too cynical about matters most of us hold in reverence. To permit her to poison the mind of a sweet girl like Amanda, who was ill but still very much alive — well, whoever is in charge of phantoms should be court-martialed and shot!

DYING, at seventeen, and provided the circumstances allow it to be decorous, can be terribly romantic. The picture one makes: pretty, though a little pale, spiritual-eyed; displayed, as it were, against a pile of pillows, with the frills of the nylon nightie showing beneath the lacy wool bed-jacket; the lights in one's hair glistened by the bedside lamp, the slender hand so delicately ivory against the pale pink

silk of the eiderdown comforter.

The bud scarce unfurled, the dew still undried, the heart not yet hardened.

Character, too: patience, sweetness, gratitude for the little things people do, kindly forgiveness to the doctors one has defeated, sympathy for those who are weepy about one, resignation, quiet fortitude. It can all be very beautiful and sad-romantic, and not nearly so distressing as people think —



particularly if one is quite sure of heaven, as Amanda was.

Search as she might, she could find no more than a few feather-weight reproaches to lay upon herself. The one or two peccadilloes she had managed to dredge up from earliest childhood — matters concerning an ownerless penny spent on sweets, an apple that had fallen from a barrow, one's failure to own up to putting the thumb-tack on Daphne Deakin's chair — would, the Rev. Mr. Willis assured her, be unlikely to have any appreciable effect upon the granting of her entry permit. So, in a way, she had an advantage over other people who would have to go on living longer lives, and probably earning black marks in the course of them. There was a lot of compensation in being assured of heaven.

At the same time, she would have liked to be a little surer of what to expect there. Mr. Willis was positive enough about the place, but in such a general way; so difficult to pin down to details. He tended, too, to evade the more piercing questions, with unsatisfactory observations on the possibility of something happening which would make the exact nature of heaven a less urgent question for her. In fact, nobody seemed either to know much about heaven, or to be willing to discuss its organizations with her.

Dr. Frobisher, after admitting

his ignorance, always steered the conversation to what he called a less morbid topic — though how heaven, of all places, could be classified as morbid Amanda failed to understand. It was much the same with her mother. Mrs. Day's expression would cloud; she would answer awkwardly once or twice, and then say, "Darling, let's talk about something more cheerful, shall we?" So Amanda, though she did not in the least understand how heaven could be heaven if it weren't cheerful, would, in the sweetness of her disposition, talk about something quite uninteresting, instead.

Still, it was very nice to know that one was qualified for heaven, and that everyone was agreed about it. Rather like winning a scholarship and becoming self-supporting at an early age, and carrying something of an obligation to be kind and thoughtful towards those who had not such advantages.

A slow decline, someone had called it — a funny idea, that: the Present, the Imperfect, the Perfect — but it was prettier to think of petals falling, fluttering softly down until one day they would all be gone, and people would cry a little and say how brave she had been, and how happy she must be in heaven now.

And possibly it would have gone off tidily like that, but for the ghost.

Just at first, Amanda did not realise she was a ghost. When she woke up and saw her standing inside the door, she thought for a moment that perhaps they had now got a night nurse who was looking in to see how she was doing. Then it occurred to her that a nurse would very likely be wearing more than just silk panties and bra, and also that she oughtn't to be visible at all, because the room was dark. The ghost, seeing her there, showed a trace of surprise.

"Oh, sorry to intrude," she said. I thought you would have gone by now." And she turned as if to leave.

She was a very unalarming-looking ghost. A friendly-seeming girl with slightly red hair, rather wide eyes, an enviable figure, and charming hands and feet. Amanda guessed her at about seven or eight years older than herself.

"No. Please don't go," she told her, on impulse.

The ghost turned back, a little surprised.

"You're sure you don't mind?" she said gratefully. "I mean, people are so touchy. Usually they scream."

"I don't see why," said Amanda. "Anyhow, I'll probably be a ghost or something myself soon."

"Oh, I shouldn't think so," said the ghost, in a social-polite voice.

"Come and sit down. You can put the eiderdown round you if

you feel cold," invited Amanda.

"Luckily, that's not one of my troubles," said the ghost, sitting down and crossing one elegant leg over the other.

"Er. . . my name's Amanda," Amanda told her.

"Mine's Virginia," said the ghost. "I can't imagine why."

There was a pause, during which Amanda's curiosity mounted. She hesitated, then she said: "I hope it's not something I shouldn't ask, but how do you happen to be a ghost? I mean, I thought people just went to one place or the other, if you see what I mean."

"One place or the other?" repeated Virginia. "Oh, I see. No, it isn't quite as simple as that. But, anyway, I'm a special case — a sort of D.P. at the moment. The whole thing is *sub judice*, so I just have to wander round until they've made up their minds."

Amanda was puzzled. "How do you mean?" she asked.

"Well," explained Virginia, "when my husband strangled me, it looked just like an ordinary murder, really. But then someone raised a question about the degree of provocation. If they decide I went above a particular reading, they can bring it in as suicide, which would be bad. Of course, I should appeal on grounds of prior counter-provocation. He's that tame sort who would provoke a saint into provoking him. I sup-

pose I did overdo it a bit. But if you knew him, you'd understand."

"What's it like? Being strangled, I mean?" Amanda asked, interestedly.

"Horrid, really," said Virginia. "And I'd have been more careful if I'd known it was going to lead to all this hanging around while they argue about it."

"It's disappointing," said Amanda. "I was hoping you might be able to tell me something about heaven."

"Heaven? Why?"

"Well," said Amanda, "nobody here seems to be able to tell me, and I expect to be going there soon. So I thought it'd be nice to know what it's like."

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Virginia, opening her wide eyes wider.

Amanda did not see that there was any "Good gracious!" about it. Expecting to go to heaven seemed to her a very reasonable ambition. She said so.

"Dear, dear. Poor thing," observed Virginia compassionately.

In anyone less sweet than Amanda, her faint moan might have been called sulkiness. "I don't see what's wrong with that," she said.

"From personal observation, I wouldn't—" began Virginia.

"Oh, you do know about it, then?"

"I've looked it over. Parts of

it, anyway," Virginia admitted.

Amanda's interest kindled. She propped herself a little higher against the pillows. "Oh, please tell me about it, please!" she begged eagerly.

Virginia considered. "Well," she said, "the first district I saw was the oriental section. It's all very gorgeous and technicolored, and you wear lots of jewels and a veil and transparent trousers. The men wear beards and turbans, and you have to cluster round them in groups of not less than twenty to each. It looks a bit like autograph-hunting, only it isn't, of course. Then, after a time, he beckons one out of the mob, and it always turns out to be somebody else, and so you have to go and find another place to cluster, and everybody simply loathes you for crashing in on their lot. It's all terribly frustrating."

"Is that all?" asked Amanda unhappily.

"Pretty much. You can eat turkish-delight in the intervals of course, and I suppose by the law of averages—"

"I mean, it doesn't sound a bit like I thought."

"Oh, it's different in different sections. The Nordic part isn't a bit like that. There you spend nearly all your time washing and bandaging great gashes in heroes, and making broth for them in between whiles. I suppose it's all

right for people who happen to have had a hospital training, but it seemed frightfully gory and messy to me. Besides, the heroes are such types. Never take a scrap of notice of you. They're either bragging, or flat out, or just off to get some more gashes. All terribly tedious, I thought."

"That doesn't sound quite the kind —" Amanda began.

But Virginia went on: "Still, I must say, for high-octane tediousness you want to take a look at the Nirvana district. Talk about high-brow! You can only see it if you peep over the wall, because there's a notice saying 'No women allowed', and —"

"What I was meaning," Amanda interrupted firmly, "is the ordinary kind of heaven. You know, the one they tell us about when we're children, but never seem to explain properly."

"Oh, that one," said Virginia. "Oh, my dear! So prim. I wouldn't advise it, really. So much choral singing and poetry reading all the time. Good, you know, high quality and all that, but sort of serious — and the music being all trumpets and harps gets kind of monotonous. So much white's awfully tiring, too. The whole thing's frightfully — what's the word, antiseptic? — no, ascetic, that's it. They've got a no-marriage law there. Imagine it! The result is nobody dares even ask you out for a cup of coffee after the music

for fear of being arrested. Mind you, I daresay saints like it quite a lot —" She broke off. "You're not a saint, are you?"

" — I don't think so."

"Well, unless you are, I simply wouldn't recommend it." Virginia went on, giving details.

Amanda listened to her with growing dismay. At last she broke in: "But it just *can't* be like that. You're simply spoiling everything for me. I was so happy knowing I was going to heaven, too. I think you're just being cruel and beastly."

Virginia stared at her. Then she said: "But my poor dear, don't you understand. They're all men's heavens, and that's hell for women. Seems as if nobody ever got around to designing a heaven for women, don't ask me why. But, honest, I'd keep well clear of these men's heavens if I were you."

But at that point Amanda's tears overflowed. The sound of her own unhappy sobs prevented her from hearing any more, and when she looked up again Virginia had gone.

In fact, Amanda was so disappointed that she was irritable and surprised everyone by starting to get better.

And when she was quite well she married an accountant who seemed to think of heaven as the perfect cybernetics machine, and that wasn't very interesting to a girl, either.

When all the metal was gone the civilized world ended. People like the Hublers and John Stafford started the slow rebuilding of society—a job made difficult enough by the lack of metal tools and weapons. But there were others trapped in the "new" stone age—roving bands of marauders who relished the new barbarism and whose only drive was to steal or destroy whatever ground the "builders" had regained!

THE METAL DOOM

DAVID H. KELLER, M.D.

Illustrated by LEO MOREY

SYNOPSIS

Civilization first noticed the menace by their watches. Not only old watches, but even the new watches in the well-ordered safes of the best jewelry shops ceased to function and showed definite signs of decay by rust. Then all metals throughout the world gave way—elevators, subways, metal framework of apartment houses, of business skyscrapers—everything of metal. All means of transportation stopped. Those far-sighted individuals who started out of the cities into the country, who had not entirely forgotten the art of living as it was known before they acquired the science of living in the highly mechanized era of the late twentieth century, survived somehow.

PAUL HUBLER and his wife, RUTH, and their baby, ANGELICA, are among the first to move and find themselves a log cabin in the woods. JOHN STAFFORD, on whose property the Hublers have settled, comes to visit them after several weeks and proposes that the Hublers join his colony, of which

he is the leader. They ask to be allowed to remain where they are for a while, but when definite danger threatened—not only them, but the entire Stafford colony—the Hublers moved over to join the rest of the group, and they succeeded in thwarting the invasion of a gang of escaped convicts who were bent on murder.

Then, soon afterwards, ANDREW MACKSON, the leader of a similar colony in Vermont, visits them, in an effort to get the Staffordites to join the Vermont colony. Instead, however, Mackson goes on a tour across country to get the leaders of the various communities which Stafford and Mackson both believe to have been formed in various parts of the country, to sign a document, what might later turn out to be of similar importance to the "Declaration of Independence," this time heralding in a new era to be known as the New Stone Age. A special set of laws are drawn up and plans for a fort, which they now feel is necessary, are being considered.

ONCE the decision was made to build Fort Telephone, there was no delay. The entire resources of the Stafford Colony were directed toward the completion of that task. It was not a small one by any means.

Fortunately, the winter was a severe one. The snow remained thick on the ground till nearly the end of March. Stone boats were made and house after house was demolished and carted piece-meal to the site of the fort. Stone fences were torn down. Whenever possible, telephone poles were rooted out of the earth and snagged to their locations. When spring came much of the building material was in place ready to begin operations. At the best it was a heart-breaking task, digging ditches, moving stones, lifting the poles in place, tamping the dirt around them.

The men from the Mason Colony came to help and thus added thirty-five men to the working force. June found the place capable of standing an assault if not an actual siege. Part of the men were detailed for agriculture, the rest kept on working; at last the women stopped their housekeeping and helped carry stones and pull on the ropes. Nothing happened. At times many of the men thought that nothing would happen, that it was all a weird nightmare and that the fort was a useless anachronism.

But at last it was finished. The little huts inside the enclosure were capable of housing a hundred families, three hundred people. There was a great deal to be done as far as the gathering of stores were concerned but the labor of building was at an end. Christmas

day found a tired but contented band of people.

On Christmas day three bearded strangers rode up to the Stafford House. Mackson of Vermont and two of his guard. The others had died on the trip. It was a return from a great adventure.

Stafford realized the importance of whatever message Mackson had for them. He knew that it might be hopeful or hopeless. He did not want to discourage the rank and file of his followers and so, uncertain and cautious, he called in six of the leaders, Hubler, the man of imagination; Peterson, the architect; Johnson, the ranking officer of the new army; Van Rocklin, the scientist; Mason, of the Mason Colony; Wagner, the farmer, and lastly himself. That made eight with Mackson.

Mackson needed no introduction. He made no elaborate peroration; he simply placed on the table a paper.

"There it is, gentlemen. That is our new constitution. I have been gone sixteen months. I went to the Pacific by the Santa Fe Route and returned over the Lincoln Highway. Of course there is a lot of the United States I never saw, but if the rest of it is like what I did see, I am glad I did not see it. I have the signatures of over two hundred communities like yours and like mine in Vermont. I suppose there are three hundred similar adventures going on in the old U.S.A. Every community I visited had the same ideas and the same ideal as we have. They were all glad to see me. They welcomed the idea of a new union. They were all composed of

thinking, hard working idealists, who had banded together for mutual help. If we could get the people of these colonies to all live in one state, we could do something. As it is they are scattered over too much territory."

"Do you mean to tell me," asked Stafford, "that in your opinion there are only about three hundred such colonies in all the United States, and each colony about like ours in size?"

"That is my estimate."

"But that is only about a hundred thousand people!"

"I suppose so."

"But—where are . . . ? Why, man! That is impossible! Where are the people? We used to have a hundred and twenty-five million in the States. What—what happened to them?"

"It is a mess," answered Mackson.

"Go and tell us," urged Hubler, kindly. "I think I know; I think we all know. I have stayed awake at night trying to—well, trying to imagine what had happened. Go on and tell us."

"All right. Here goes. In the first place we saw most of the large cities. The main highways passed through most of them. The cities are gone, especially the business sections. You see the buildings were simply built around structural iron and when that rotted the buildings simply collapsed and the streets were not wide enough to hold the debris, so they just filled up, fifty to seventy-five feet, of every possible kind of wealth—just junk. In the residential sections it was a little better because the buildings were not so high and there was more wood used. I do not know how many people were killed in the city. Perhaps many millions left in time but there must

have been as many millions who thought they would stick it out, and died in the first collapse.

"In the country things were a little better. The people were nearer the sources of food, the country people more accustomed to making use of their hands. If they were far enough away from the city, the country people did not do so badly, for a while. But those who lived near the large cities were simply over-run. At first the urbanites were willing to pay money, but very soon they money gave out; the food was used up and then began a fight for life between the people in the country and the visitors from the cities. It was a fight for life. Every farmhouse was a little fort, every farm a battle ground. When the city people won, they wasted the food through ignorance. When the farmers won, they simply had to start fighting all over again. I talked to the heads of the various colonies who signed our constitution, and all they could tell me of those first months was that it was KILL, KILL, KILL!! or be killed. It did not last long. The people from the city had no stamina, their women were weak, their children puny. They died like flies. The main highways are marked, not by signboards but by bodies and bones. Disease came, and at last winter. Only the strong survived, and they were only of two groups. One class is represented by the various colonies, the other class are escaped criminals, former gangsters."

"We know about that last kind," remarked Stafford.

"I suppose so. You can tell me about it later. Now for the sections. I did not see much of it but they tell me

that the white population in the real Southern States is wiped out. For generations they held the negro down with firearms. When it came to the point where clubs and stones were the only weapon, the negro rose and that was the end of white supremacy. Of course the colored man has his own problems of survival now south of the Mason and Dixon Line.

"West of the Mississippi it is different. Texas, New Mexico and Arizona are fighting for their lives against the waves of Mexicans and Indians from over the border. They are having real war down there. Every Texan I met said the Lone Star was going to keep on shining. They are even talking about forming an army and going down to Mexico and settling the thing once and for all. They were interested in our proposition but so busy with their own troubles that they did not have much time to give it. They signed on the dotted line, but I am not sure how much it will mean.

"California is very much like New York. They still have a lot of climate but had to admit that the tourist business was at a standstill. They are trying to form a republic west of the Rockies and wanted to be friendly with us, but at the same time they felt rather isolated. You understand how they feel after you have made the journey out there on horseback."

"So you think the criminal element is a real menace?" asked Hubler.

"I do. Everywhere we went the serious thinkers were worried about it. You see the escaped criminal and the gangster were used to fighting for what they thought belonged to them. They were used to killing, to running in herds and packs and gangs. It was just second

nature to them. The complete overthrow of all the organized restraint gave them an unusual sense of freedom. For the first time the policeman was not standing on the corner. They have all organized. In some districts their bands number hundreds. Of course they fight among themselves but mainly they are killing the decent isolated country people."

"How about the change in the country, the fields and the animals?" asked farmer Wagner.

"There are a lot of wild dogs. They are gathering in packs. Out west the lions are growing in numbers and courage. We heard a lot about escapes from the Zoological Gardens. I talked to one man who said he believed there were over two hundred lions and tigers in the United States. We saw a herd of elephants, and a lot of other wild animals escaped from various circuses. Of course most of them are shy, but in time the flesh eaters will start killing.

"As far as the land is concerned, it is going back to nature."

"Looks rather hopeless," commented Van Recklin, scientist.

Chapter XV Stafford Goes Away

The tired man from Vermont was put to bed. The leaders talked for a while longer and then all left except Stafford and Hubler. Paul had been asked to stay.

"It looks as though civilization had a grand smash, Paul," said Stafford. "Must have been rotten at the core to go to pieces so quickly."

"Something was wrong," agreed Hubler. "Looks as though the in-

dividual became too highly specialized, learned to do one thing and became incapable of doing anything else. Cannot live that way in the Stone Age. A man has to be Jack-of-all-trades to survive."

"Of course the cities were doomed."

"Certainly; but if it had not been the Metal Doom, it would have been something else. Conditions were becoming too congested, too artificial; things had to break; something, somehow—what I want to say is that in some way the city, as a place of abode was on the way to destruction anyway."

"Have you ever wanted to go back and see what happened to it, Hubler?"

"Sometimes. But that is just curiosity. I do not think I was ever really happy there; and I was born there. I would like to go back and live in the old farm house where Ruth and I were when you first met us. That was a sweet place to live."

"Let me ask you a question. How would you like to take charge of this place? Be the leader of Fort Telephone?"

Hubler laughed as he replied. "What for? With you here? All the boys like you."

"I think I am going away."

"What for?"

"I don't know. Just going. I guess I am fed up on the life here. It is different with you. You have the wife and little girl. I am just an old bachelor. We have the fort built now, and all you have to do is to fill the storehouses with supplies, and keep things going. I am going to take my favorite horse, and I am going to go out into the world and see what it looks like. Two years now and I have

not been more than five miles away from the house."

"You ask Mackson to be the head."

"No. He is popular with his men but he is not the right man for the commander of the Fort if anything happens. He could not anticipate trouble. Now you have imagination."

"You have said that before. Well, I won't argue with you. When are you leaving?"

"At daybreak. You tell the boys and say good-bye to Mackson. Tell them that if things get too hot up in Vermont then he and his company will always be welcomed here."

Hubler looked at Stafford anxiously.

"You will take care of yourself and come back safe?"

"Sure. Don't you worry about that. Comes spring and I'll be here to look after the young stock."

"Take some of the men with you, won't you?"

"No. I want to have a good time. I don't want to bother with any men."

Back to his bedroom, Paul woke Ruth to tell her the news.

"Stafford is leaving the colony."

"I expected it."

"Why? Did he say anything to you?"

"No. But he has been restless. He has finished the fort and there isn't anything big here to do, so he is restless."

"I bet he has something up his sleeve."

"I suppose so. Stop talking so loud. You'll wake the baby."

At daybreak Stafford had an early breakfast, walked over to the stables, saddled his favorite horse, carefully tied on a stone tipped lance, a battle ax, small tomahawk and his bow and

arrow, and then with a warm handshake for all the stable men, rode off into the early sunrise.

There was a little snow on the ground, and the air was just cold enough to stimulate. The horse felt good, the rider felt good; everything seemed all right.

"I am free from care," Stafford acknowledged. "For an old bachelor I was growing too large a family. It was nerve racking; so now the family can shift for themselves as best they can while I go off on adventure bound. Shall it be the city or a wilder country? East or West? North or South? I know what I will do. The Mason colony have a flat boat; I will have them take me across the Hudson, and then I will go down the Delaware River Valley to the Water Gap. That was a favorite drive of mine in the good old automobile days. I always thought that Mount Minsi would be a fine place to build a fort on. There are a lot of good cement roads over there and I guess if we go slow and are careful, the old horse won't go lame. I may locate a few new colonies down that way."

He spent the first night at the Mason Colony. As part owners of Fort Telephone they knew and respected Stafford. But they advised him not to cross the river.

"There is a lot of wild country over there and it is growing wilder all the time. Not many people but lots of dogs and we hear some real lions."

"I always wanted to kill a lion," said Stafford.

Not being able to change his mind, they took him across the river. A week later he had circled around Port Jervis. Two days later he was at Mil-

ford. From there down to Bushkill, Shawnee and the Water Gap was a short ride.

The trip had been singularly devoid of excitement. The country was peculiarly depopulated. There were any number of stone houses, and he was always able to make himself fairly comfortable at night. In most of the barns there was hay for his horse, but the country people had all left. At Milford he found a partial explanation. There was a fort. Singularly it was very much like Fort Telephone, and around that fort over two hundred families were spending the winter. He had a long talk with the leader and made arrangements for mutual help in time of need.

The advised him not to try to go further south.

"It is a long trip to Easton," they said, "and there is nothing to see. There is another colony and fort in Cherry Valley but the Stroudsburgs are empty."

"Anybody living at the Gap?"

"Don't think so."

"I am going anyway."

One of the older men took him to one side, and whispered. "Don't want to scare you, but there are some tigers and lions down that way."

"You don't say so? Real ones?"

The old man shook his head in assent.

"There's been horses and cows killed by them."

So that was just one more reason for Stafford going on. He planned it all out. If he could he would use his bow and arrow; or, if the horse would stand for it, he would lasso the brute. If he had to he would tie the horse and go on foot and use the lance. He still had left the battle ax, tomahawk,

and his sharp flint hunting knife.

"Have to be careful not to spoil the hide," he said to himself, with a grin.

At Shawnee he took a detour leading up the side of the mountain. It was a nice dirt road. He was partly influenced by the sight of smoke curling up through the frosty air. People had a fire there and he wanted to meet them. At the top of the road he suddenly saw what he was looking for.

Not a house, nor people but a tiger.

It was in the middle of a little meadow surrounded on three sides by the forest and on the south side by the road. The tiger was leisurely eating his kill, a dead calf. If he saw the man and horse he paid no attention to them but kept on eating. The horse trembled and tried to turn around. Stafford tied him to a tree, slung his quiver of arrows on his back, took a lance and the bow and ax in his hand and jumped over the fence. He was about fifty yards from the tiger. His striped tawny hide made a beautiful mark against the snow of the meadow. Stafford took his heaviest hunting arrow, carefully estimated the distance and let fly. It struck the beast's neck, back of the ear and passed completely through.

The tiger cried and charged. Stafford had time for one more arrow and then seized his lance. Fifteen feet from him the tiger jumped. In the air he was impaled on the stone point of the lance. It broke under his weight, but he was dead when he touched the ground. Stafford wiped his forehead. He was surprised to find that he was sweating freely. A woman came running out of the forest and across the meadow.

"You have killed my tiger," she cried, angrily.

Chapter XVI A Lady and a Tiger

Stafford looked at the dead tiger and then at the angry woman. He never said a word in reply. She came closer, and the man saw that the right hand held a small stone hammer, held by the handle and ready to throw. She repeated her accusation.

"You have killed my tiger!"

"Your tiger?" he asked in astonishment.

"Certainly! And what business have you anyway up here? Trespassing on our land and killing our pets. I have half a mind to kill you, you big brute, to go and kill a poor tiger who never hurt anybody."

"But it was eating that calf, Madam."

"It had to eat something, and anyway, it was our calf, and none of your business. What are you going to do about it?"

Stafford took out his hunting knife.

"I am going to skin it for you," he said. "Seems strange to me, what you say, but if it was your tiger, and I do not for the life of me see what you were doing with a tiger, but if it was your tiger, it is a dead tiger now and the only good you could have out of it is the skin, so I'll skin it for you and take it to your house, if you'll let me."

"What did you kill it for?"

"Wanted to. Always wanted to kill a lion or a tiger. Heard there were wild ones down here, and thought I might have a chance."

Skinning a tiger under the best of

conditions is not a small job and it is a larger one when a flint knife was the only one available. The woman sat on a large stone and silently watched the process. At last Stafford finished, brought his lasso and tied the skin in a compact bundle, and fastened the other end to the horn of his saddle.

"Now if you tell me where you live, Madam," he said, "I will drag this skin to your front door and drop it there. I guess you know how to peg it out and salt it."

"Don't call me Madam! Call me Doctor."

"You mean that you are a physician?"

"Certainly. Don't I look like a physician?"

"No. Most of the women physicians I have seen look a little old and worn out, while you look—well, just a little young."

"Perhaps that is because I have not been working since the crash came. Since you have killed my tiger, I might as well let you bring the skin home. It is not far to the house, so I will walk on ahead of you."

"I'll walk with you, Doctor, if you are willing."

Fifteen minutes later they came to an old brick schoolhouse. Two other women were standing at the door.

"Where have you been, Dotty?" asked one of them.

"Out feeding my tiger and this man went and killed it, so I invited him back for dinner and this afternoon he is going to show me how to start tanning the skin."

"Hmmmm. Well, why not introduce everybody?"

"My name is Stafford," said the

man nodding toward the women.

"And I am Doctor Perno, and these ladies are Doctor Brown and Doctor Hoffard."

"Pleased to meet you, ladies. Seem to be a lot of Doctors here."

"Yes. You see we lived here in the summer, so when the change came we thought it best to stay here. There are about ten other women around here. Quite a little colony."

"And no men?"

"Of course not. What would we want men for?"

"I see. I thought a man might be handy now and then, but evidently one is not needed here. So now I will say good-bye and be on my way."

"We turned the garage into a barn," answered Dr. Perno, and you will find room for your horse there and hay for him, and I guess the girls have something to eat and so you had better stay and show me about that skin."

In a short time the three Doctors and Stafford were seated at the table. Stafford looked around.

"You ladies seem to be real comfortable here."

"Yes," replied Doctor Brown, "and we were doing well. Two cows and a few goats, and—then the tiger came, and there is nothing left. Took our last calf last night."

"And Dotty was so mad she took her tomahawk and said she was going to find that tiger and settle with him."

Stafford looked at Dr. Perno.

"Yes, Dr. Brown. The business of having tigers for pets is a costly one at times. This one cost me my best lance. Perhaps it was a good thing for the tiger I came along when I did. If Dr. Perno had found that

cat first she would have been right brutal to it. As it was, all she was brutal to was the insolent stranger who killed her poor pet."

"Have some more beans," said the Doctor in question.

"And you ladies have lived here all these months and not had any trouble?" asked the man.

"The sun did not always shine," whispered Dr. Brown.

"We have had our ups and downs," added Dr. Hoffard.

"And now and then have our pets killed," purred Dr. Perno.

"And there are thirteen of you. All physicians?"

"Of course not. School teachers, and nurses, and even a retired lawyer."

"Well, well! Thirteen. That is an unlucky number. I feel that something is going to happen to one of you."

"Oh! Yes!" replied Dr. Perno. "Like having our tiger killed?"

"Something like that," laughed the man. "But seriously, ladies, you ought to have protection."

"Nonsense! No one ever comes here."

And at that the door was flung open and in rushed a number of women. There were excited questions and answers. Everybody talked at once. Finally the story came out. The lookout (for it seems that the women really took turns watching from a high hill) had seen a small group of men on horseback come up the road. Before she could give warning, the first house of the feminine colony had been captured, the two women living their killed and the house set afire.

"It is the old story," said Stafford, quietly. "You were just lucky not to have it happen before. Now you wom-

en stay here and shut the windows and doors and keep quiet. If the men come, you fight. I am going to leave you."

Dr. Perno went up to him, and put her hand on his shoulder.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"Going to kill some more tigers," he said smiling.

"I am going with you," she replied. He shook his head.

"Not this time," he whispered. "This business of vermin hunting is not a nice one for ladies to engage in."

"You will come back?"

"Sure."

Chapter XVII Stafford Comes Back

Stafford looked a little old as he walked out to the garage and saddled his horse; things had taken a rather unexpected turn.

He knew that he had to go and kill those men. He felt fairly confident he could do so. He did not feel that he was a hero; he did not even feel afraid; just rather irritated at having to do something like that just at this particular time.

At a walk he rode the horse down the road. Soon he heard shouts and talking. He turned into the woods and hid behind a large rock. Ten men passed him, and their talk betrayed them. They were hunting women and the two they had met were too old. Stafford arranged his quiver so the arrows were easily grasped, and had his horse walk out on the road. He was now about seventy feet in back of his prey.

He stopped his horse and after careful aim sped an arrow. Almost

before it had reached its mark another was in the air, and another. Three men tumbled to the ground. The other seven turned their horses, saw only one man and charged. Two more dropped and then Stafford charged to meet them, lance at point. He ran through a man, dodged the blows of the others and galloped up the road. Sixty yards up he turned his horse and again started to shoot. Two men were left and they charged. At least they were not cowards. One had his skull crushed, the other, as he galloped by struck Stafford's left arm and broke the bone. Stafford, holding his ax in his right hand and guiding his horse with his knees, pursued him. They met in front of the old school house. The bandit was armed with a club, and they fought it out, with the women watching from the windows. Stafford could not guard his left side and there the club fell crushing him to the ground. The bandit jumped off his horse, ran over to where the man lay, senseless on the snow, and raising his club, prepared to give the death blow. The club dropped from his hands, he looked puzzled, and slowly sunk to the ground, his skull almost cut in half.

Stafford kept on sleeping. At last he woke. He looked around him. Everything looked strange. He was puzzled, could not remember what had happened. He shut his eyes. Again he opened them. A woman was sitting by his bed. He remembered now; at least a part of it.

"I had a dream," he said. I thought I was home.

"You are, dear," said the woman, kissing him.

"So that is the way of it," he said

rather contentedly. "Just what happened? The last I remembered I was in a bad way. I think I must have made a failure of my last kill."

Dr. Brown came in just in time to hear that question and she answered it.

"It was like this. Dotty had a ring-side seat, and when the umpire started to count you out she became restless and got into the fight. In other words, she killed another tiger."

"So that is the way it was?" said the man, looking at the woman. She started to blush.

"It wasn't anything. You killed a tiger for me, I killed one for you," she said.

"I see. Did you get the horses?"

Yes. We have all ten in the pasture, and three of the men in the hospital."

"You mean you didn't—. I mean you are taking care of them?"

"Certainly," answered Dr. Brown. "They were rather badly hurt, but it was wonderful surgery. You killed the other seven, you and Dottie. What's the matter? You look as though you weren't pleased."

"Up our way," said Stafford, "we don't take prisoners."

"You don't mean that you kill them?"

"I think you heard me the first time, Dr. Brown."

The Doctor was puzzled. She went and talked it over with the other physicians. They came *en masse* and asked Stafford to explain his statement to them. He seemed tired and talked slowly, as though he were explaining simple facts to a group of children.

"I do not believe you women understand just what has happened in the world. You came up here, and it

was a rather isolated and sheltered position and you were not where you could see the changes that took place in the social and judicial thinking of society.

"Life used to be considered a very wonderful thing, and everything was done to prolong life. It did not make any difference whether the life was of any value or not or whether the person deserved to live. The idiot, the epileptic, the insane, the degenerate and the criminal were all taken care of. In time of war prisoners were taken, and, even though they were not taken care of very well, at least, their lives were spared. And it was only occasionally that a man was so bad that he was punished for his crimes by the taking of his life; in a large majority of crimes the criminal was simply shut up and the good people of the state were made to support him.

"It is all different now. The few groups of decent people who have managed to exist so far have all they can do to keep going. All their energies have to be spent in self-preservation. The hopelessly insane, the uneducatable idiot, the hardened criminal have no possible place in the best communities of the new Stone Age.

"I am the leader of a colony of about two hundred persons. We are trying to the best of our ability to survive. But that undertaking means that we can raise only normal children, cannot care for hopeless insanity, and, under no circumstances, can we, after a battle, expend our energy and provisions in the care of prisoners, wounded or not."

"Let me ask you a question," said Dr. Brown. "You are attacked by a band of escaped convicts. You win the

fight. Many of your enemy are badly wounded. Do you mean to say that you kill them?"

"Yes."

"And if you had a little feeble minded child born in the colony, you would kill it?"

"Fortunately it has not happened yet, but the colony could not agree to care for that child, as a member of the colony."

The lawyer of the group interrupted, "You have thrown away one of the greatest ethical possessions of humanity, the care of the unfortunate by the more fortunate, the most wonderful lesson of Christianity to mankind."

Stafford looked a little more tired as he replied:

"We haven't thrown away anything, Madam. But certain conditions were forced on us by the Metal Doom, and we have only done what we have had to do."

"You are terribly brutal. I am glad you are not my husband. I wouldn't marry you if you were the last man on the earth."

"I am sure of that, Joan," said Dr. Perno.

Four weeks later Stafford headed a little band northward from Shawnee. Through the Delaware River Valley they went northward, reversing the journey he had made when he went tiger hunting. At last they came to the Stafford Colony and Fort Telephone.

That night he held a meeting of the associate leaders of the colony. One of the men questioned the wisdom of his step.

"Looks rather foolish to me, Stafford. Might be all right to bring one woman here. We would have given you

three rousing cheers, but when we saw you coming up the road, followed by eleven women, we were not sure that you had remained sane. What in the world can we do with eleven women?"

"It was this way, boys," the leader replied. "These eleven women were all highly educated, and between them just the finest lot of the old maids you ever met, and not so old either. I happened to find them and just in time. If I had come a day or so later, they would have all been killed. I became acquainted with them and I thought they would be of great help to our colony. You see, a lot of our boys are not married, nice enough boys, but never married when they could and then, when the crash came, it was too late. So, I thought it would be a good thing to bring back some wives for them—and I did."

"But those women won't marry our boys. They are Doctors and lawyers and teachers. They won't marry our cowboys and stable men."

"Won't they? You just wait and see. It is my opinion that everyone of them will be married in a month or two. They just never married before, because men were too common, but now—it's different now."

"Let me ask you a question, Stafford," said Hubler. "Are you going to marry one of them?"

"I never thought of that, Paul," said Stafford with a laugh. "I have been so busy bringing that lot of women through danger safely that I never did think of marrying one of them. Now you met them all at supper, Paul. Which one do you think I ought to wed?"

"That lawyer would be the best one."

"O.K. with me," said Stafford.

Chapter XVIII The Eastern Migration

The next day Stafford made an inspection of the Colony with Paul Hubler. He personally saw and spoke to all the people who lived within the shadow and protection of Fort Telephone. He saw all his favorite horses and all the new born calves and colts. Everything was quiet and peaceful.

"Not a cloud in the sky," he commented to Hubler. "It all looks very much like the old days. Not as busy and noisy as it was then, but on the surface, things are very much as they used to be. At times I think that I was over excited when I allowed you to persuade me into building Fort Telephone. I do not believe we shall ever need it."

"At least, I have gone ahead with the storing of necessities in it," replied Hubler. "All the time you were gone we filled the houses with grain and every possible thing we could need in case of a siege. I had the men make two trips to New York City, and while the plundering of that place is very difficult, we brought back a lot of stuff. You would be surprised to see our card index. And we have all the huts whitewashed and furnished. If we had to, we could put four hundred people inside the fort, shut the gates and start providing for them, and I think we have provisions for several months."

"I am not sure that we shall ever have to use the place, Paul. I have praised your imagination, but at times I have felt you had a little too much. Now, in regard to your idea of my

marrying that lawyer; that was just imagination run riot."

"Have you asked her to marry you?"

"No. Did not have to. She told me that if I were the last man—"

He never finished the sentence. A horseman galloped up.

"You men are wanted at the house right away."

"Anything wrong?"

"Must be. A stranger was brought in by the sentinel, and then they came running down to the barn and told me to get the Boss back as soon as I could. Had a hard time finding you."

Later on the two men walked into the office of the Colony. A stranger stood up as they entered and introduced himself.

"I am Webster, from Maine," he said simply. "Things are going wrong up there and they sent me down to give the warning."

"Sit down and rest," urged Stafford. "You look tired."

"I am. Been riding hard."

"So, things are bad up in Maine?"

"Worse than bad. They just about wiped us out. We have five rather flourishing groups up there, doing fine, and then they came."

"Who are they?" asked Hubler.

"The Tartars."

"Not from Asia?" asked the astonished Stafford.

"I guess so. Of course, I never was over there and we cannot talk their language, and, even if we could, we have been fighting so hard that there was no time for conversation, but they look like the description in the histories, and they act like real Huns of some kind."

"Where did they come from?" queried Hubler.

"Must have come from Europe. First we knew they were in Maine. We had a colony of fishermen right on the coast and those of the colony who escaped said they just woke up one morning and there they were, in what seemed like hundreds of sailing vessels. They just landed and that was the end of that colony and then they spread. We had a little warning and we started to fight, but it was a hopeless battle from the first. They nearly wiped that first colony out; only a few escaped. After that they just spread out and mopped up the state of Maine."

"Couldn't you do anything? Didn't you have arrows and spears, and stone clubs? Did you know how to fight?" asked Stafford.

"Of course. We had made weapons, and practiced in their use, but we were like children against those men. They had done nothing but fight with hand weapons for centuries and they were as much at home on horses as they would be on a chair. Besides, every fight was an unequal one. A colony or group of about one hundred fighting men against several thousand Asiatics. It was just slaughter after slaughter. No prisoners, no hope."

"And they are coming this way?"

"Looks like it. I have tried to spread the news. Another courier went up toward Vermont and Canada. We thought that we might make an united stand on this side of the Hudson. The battle will have to be fought in the open and to the death. When we are through, either we will control the East or they will. If they win, it will mean more boats and more Tar-

tars, and soon the entire western continent will be Asiatic."

"Have you any idea as to how many men we shall have in that army?"

"Not exactly."

"You are not even sure that the colonies will realize the danger and respond?"

"No. But we heard rumors that a number of them had signed some kind of a compact to assist against a mutual enemy."

"They did. A Vermonter took the paper to the Pacific Coast and back again; but only a limited number of those colonies could possibly respond in time to help stop the enemy east of the Hudson. Where do you think we ought to form a line?"

"Right here. On my way I passed that fence; your men called it the North Fence. I have seen some stone fences, but that is the best I have ever seen. If we had rifles, we could hold that fence against the world. That is where we ought to stand. I think we can form a force of a thousand men at least."

"And you think the battle ought to be in the open?"

"Yes. If we go into a fort, they will simply flow around the place, leave enough force to hold it, and go on. Eventually, the people inside the fort would be starved out."

"A hand to hand battle," mused Stafford, "is not at all pleasant. We shall lose a lot of men."

"And if you don't have that kind of a battle, you will lose them all."

"What do you think, Hubler?" asked Stafford.

"Something like this. Suppose we have a thousand Americans on one side of a stone wall and two thousand Tar-

tars on the other side. Each army is equipped with the same kind of weapon, arrows, spears, clubs. But the Tartars are doing something they are used to; they have been fighting for centuries. We are just relearning arts of warfare that have been obsolete in our civilization for hundreds of years. Result? Not a chance in the world for the cultured American. We are brave, but those Tartars are going to win easily.

"Now, what have we that those Tartars lack? Science of the highest form. When the crash came, we felt there was nothing we could not do in the field of science. Compared with our learning, the Tartars were idiotic children. In some way we have to make use of that scientific intelligence."

"But how can we," asked Webster, "when we have no metals?"

"That is the point. We have to apply our education in some way we never thought of before. The intelligence we used to have is still there; our inventors are still alive; we still have our scientists. This has to be a battle between intelligence and muscle, and always in the past intelligence has won. That is why man is ruler of the world today, even in a second stone age. That is why the most intelligent races have always been able to wipe out those of lesser intelligence."

"And what is your plan of battle?" asked Stafford.

"A rather simple one and rather impossible, it may be. I would put a front line of defence at the North Fence. The women and children I would put in Telephone Fort and there I would put the married men. From this hour on I would say to our scientists, 'Work! Think! Invent!! 'ON

YOUR INTELLIGENCE DEPENDS THE SAFETY OF OUR PEOPLE!!' Then I would hold the North Fence as long as possible and when the time comes, I would retreat to the second line of defence. When that is taken those who are alive can go into the Fort. I hope, in the meantime, the scientists will solve the problem."

"Suits me," said Webster. "I am going to bed. Mr. Stafford, will you send men into the neighboring country and tell them of the danger and ask them for help? Eastern Pennsylvania, New Jersey and New York should do something. I expect a thousand refugees from the New England States to come in during the next few days, but, of course, many of that thousand will be women and children and tired and wounded men."

"Not all of them," said a new voice.

"Mackson!" simultaneously cried Stafford and Hubler.

"And a hundred Green Mountain boys with him!" laughed Mackson.

Chapter XIX Flight of a Tartar Tribe

It was not till some years later, after communication with Europe had been re-established, that the people of America gained a full understanding of the Asiatic menace that threatened to wipe out the little colonies of Eastern United States.

For centuries the desert lands of Asia had bred broods of nomads. Tramps of the desert, they knew nothing except war, cared for nothing except their horses, weapons, and the open sky, and feared nothing except the silent enemy, Hunger. For a hun-

dred years or more they would have food for all, horses, warriors, and even for the women and children. Their tents covered the plains like stars in the sky, their herds, uncounted and almost uncared for, provided all their needs. Then would come a year of famine, and, like caribou migrating, the Tartars would move, sometimes one way and at other times another way. Down into China, over the Himalaya to rich India, westward to Constantinople, even to Vienna. Northwest to Poland. Where they went they conquered, and boasted that where their horses tramped the grass never again grew green. Rapine and plunder and slaughter. Pyramids of heads! Little valleys filled with bodies of the slain. And in a land of plenty they would stay, to become the nobility of an effete Russia, the Overlords of Paranoia, the land that made the Great War possible.

The Metal Doom had nothing to do with the latest of these migrations. It would have come anyway. But because of the onset of the second Age of Stone, the irresistible force met nothing to stop it. No immovable body in the form of Charles Martel stood in the way. European civilization had learned to fight with the weapons of scientific invention. When these arms were taken from them, the European went down in defeat. At last the Tartars stood on the eastern shore of the Atlantic Ocean.

This was simply one of periodic migrations. It was as instinctive as that of the lemmings in Norway, the swallows of Europe or the flight of the wild goose to Labrador. Back of it was no distinctive purpose, no cool, intelligent calculation, no purpose born of adult reactions to definite stimulæ.

Instead, it was a slow, steady surging westward, constantly crashing its crushing criminal course, regardless of all opposition. And at last they reached the shores of the Atlantic.

For centuries the Dutch, Belgians, and Britons had sailed the sea. In boats of willow and skin, of wood propelled by oar and sail, in ships of iron with steam kettles in their darksome depths, they had sailed the sea. They had to go down to the water in ships or die of land sickness. When the Metal Doom came they sighed a day for their pretty playthings and then started to make other boats of wood, pinned together with wooden pins, and fitted with sails, primitive but beautiful.

The Tartars knew nothing of the sea. Their oceans of sand knew no other ship of the desert than the camel and the horse. They were nomads but not navigators. But they had to go West and west they went, in boats sailed by Europeans; and some ships sank and others were thrown back on the Irish coast; but enough came to the coast of Maine to allow a Tartar invasion of a continent hitherto immune from their ravages.

In Maine they first killed and then hunted for horses. Once on horses, they were at home; it was easier to kill on horseback. They went west and south and where they met other peoples they killed, for no other reason than the sheer joy of killing. Here and there they made pyramids of heads, not large pyramids, but of the correct shape and materials; and none of the Americans in their pathway were able to do anything but fight and die.

Down through Maine and Massachusetts they surged. And at last

through Connecticut and towards the Hudson. Time meant nothing to them; geography was an empty term. All they thought of was to go on and on, and in the going kill.

They did not reach New York as quickly as Webster thought they would. He had traveled alone on the wings of despair, while they had come on in a group of two thousand, their hands and feet heavy with blood and satiated with killing. Thus, it was two weeks to a day from the time that Webster broke the news to the Stafford colony that the first riders from Tartary came within sight of the North Fence.

It was a peculiarly situated fence. Built of stone, it marked the northern boundary of the Stafford acreage. One end of it paused abruptly on a palisade that dropped three hundred feet into the Hudson. The other end ran into a primitive woodland, where the trees were so large and so close together that only a man on foot could pass through it. This wood was a mile wide and rested against a sheer mountain. There were two main roads. One passed through the North Fence and the other passed on the far side of the mountain.

On both sides of the stone fence ran as pretty a meadow as God ever greened for the pleasure of his creatures. From the far side of the fence this meadow flowed downward till it came, a half mile away, to a little stream. Between this stream and the North Fence the Tatar tribe came to a definite pause in the fight. There was something in the appearance of that fence that made them feel it best to consider it carefully. Up to this time they had simply flowed over opposition. Now they stopped.

Chapter XX An Important Two Weeks

The days following Webster's arrival was a busy one for the Americans located at or near Fort Telephone. It was so busy that Angelica Hubler was not sure that she had a Father and Ruth Hubler was satisfied that her husband thought more of his position in the Stafford Colony than of his place as a husband and a father. It was not till twilight that he had a chance to see his little family. They walked out in the pasture after supper. It was a pretty clear evening. They walked quite a little way, so far that they were alone in the pasture. Paul talked to his wife about the problem everyone was trying to solve.

"The only chance we have to beat these people," he explained, "is to use our intelligence in some way so we can crush them. If we depend on our muscles, we are sunk."

"You ought to be able to do something," replied Ruth. "I thought that some of the best known scientists in America would be with us in a little while, when the other Colonies join us."

"They have the brains all right, and if it were in the old days, before we went into the age of stone, we should have no trouble at all, but when we lost our metals, we lost everything."

Angelica felt very much out of it all. She tugged at her Father's hand:

"Daddy, what are those birds up there in the sky?"

"I think they are hawks, Little One."

"What are they doing, Daddy?"

"Looking around for something to eat."

"Are they flying, Daddy?"

"No, they are soaring."

And he explained to the little girl how the birds balanced themselves on their wings and, taking advantage of the currents of air, sailed back and forth without very much muscular effort. She listened gravely and then commented, "I wish I could do like that."

Hubler looked at her and then he shut his eyes. For a second, time stopped, went back, and then forward again.

"I am not feeling well," he explained to his wife. "The events of the day have been a little too much for me. I want to go back. I have to see Stafford. It is about something very important."

"You spend a lot more time with Stafford than you do with us," complained Ruth.

"That may be, but perhaps sometime things will be quiet again and then we can do what we want to; perhaps we can even go and live in the old house on the deserted farm."

"I should like that," commented Angelica.

Everybody had been working at full speed that day. The leaders had reached the point where they really wanted a rest. Even Stafford objected when Hubler insisted on an evening conference.

"You had better rest, Paul," he advised.

"I can't. This is something that I have to get off my mind. We cannot lose a minute. This may save our country. We have to talk it over."

"All right, but only an hour. These

men will crack if we drive them too hard."

"I only want five minutes. If I cannot put the idea over in five minutes, I'll be willing to say it is a bum one."

In an hour's time he was facing twenty of the most brilliant men in that part of America. There was no time piece in that room, but there were hour glasses, filled with sand, which flowed from one glass container into another one.

Hubler placed a small sand glass on the center table.

"Gentlemen," he said. "There is an egg timer. It takes just that long to soft-boil an egg. And I am going to take less than that time to give you my idea."

And the sand was still flowing when he paused.

The result of his few words was electrical. His idea was so simple that everyone wondered why someone had not thought of it before. The conversation was general, spontaneous, encouraging. Here was hope! Mankind from that moment ceased to grope in the dismal muck of despair, and began to return to the culture that once marked the height of the electrical age.

Six of the men worked on into the morning, but Hubler excused himself and returned to Ruth and Angelica.

"What did that man do before the crash, Stafford?" asked one of the scientists, as Paul left the room.

"I think he was a bank clerk of some kind."

"He seems to have a complete insight into every problem. He must have had an education out of the ordinary."

"I doubt it. He told me once that he never had a college education. But he read a lot, and the big thing he has is something that some of us lack—IMAGINATION."

During the next two weeks everyone worked hard at something. It was a peculiar period. In analyzing it later on, the interesting comment was made that during that time not a single written order was given. There was close harmony, complete co-operation between everyone. Everyone saw the peculiar work to be done which he or she was best fitted to do and then went and did it. At the end of ten days, Fort Telephone was well fitted to sustain a siege and all plans for the defence of the North Fence had been completed.

Stafford had been busy since his return from Pennsylvania. Without any intent on his part he had seen but little of the women he had brought with him from Shawnee. Others of the Colony had not been so indifferent and already six of the women had married. The three Doctors, however, still remained single. One day, after the decision had been made to fight the battle out at the North Fence, Dr. Perno deliberately stopped Stafford on his front door steps.

"Good morning, Tiger Killer," she said.

"And the same to you, Man Killer," he retorted.

"Listen to me, Mr. Stafford. There is going to be a fight soon—!"

"Not a fight, a battle!"

"Well, anyway, there are going to be a lot of men hurt. Have you arranged for a field hospital?"

"I think so. We have two men physicians who were told to look after

the arrangements for the wounded."

"How about us three women?"

"You had better stay at Fort Telephone. There may be a lot of work for you there."

"We, at least I—well, anyway, I want to help back of the fence."

Stafford shook his head.

"You might get hurt," he said.

"What difference would that make? No one would care."

"Are you sure of that?"

The man and woman looked at each other. At last Stafford said, with a little smile: "These are bad times, Dr. Perno. No one can tell where any of us will be in a few weeks. If I were sure of the future, I would like to talk to you about some things, but just now the kindest thing is to tell you to stay with the other women inside Fort Telephone."

Dr. Perno never replied. She simply turned and walked away. Stafford looked at her, somewhat puzzled.

He commented aloud, "I wonder what is the matter with that woman."

But other important matters claimed his immediate thought. Men were constantly coming to him for advice and suggestions. Messages had to be sent to this point and that. New arrivals had to be welcomed and arrangements made for their comfort, pending THE DAY. These new arrivals were interesting; they were all rather well-educated men, and, independent of each other, had all arrived at the same place as far as their weapons were concerned. Axes of stone, bows and arrows, spears represented their walking arsenals. One group, a little one and the only one from Delaware, brought a catapult, on a cart. It was capable of throwing a hundred pound stone, but

it took some time to load it. Against fortification it might be useful; but its effectiveness in fighting an enemy in the field was a question.

There was a great deal of discussion concerning the use of cavalry. Stafford was opposed to it.

"We are fighting," he said, "an enemy who are expert horsemen. Fighting from the saddle is second nature to them. If we went into them on horseback, we should be wiped out. I think that the place to keep our horses is back of the Fort. If we are defeated, the women and their guard might need those horses to escape to the West. I think that we have to do what we can on foot, and hope that our scientists will come through in time."

On the thirteenth day there was a general movement of the fighting force of the American army to the North Fence. Spies had told of the final approach of the Tartar tribe. All realized that the next day might tell the final story. There were only about a thousand men to defend the fence, and it was a long fence for that number to defend. Stafford hoped that the attack would come at one point and that they would be given sufficient warning as to where that point would be to concentrate there. He realized, and perhaps they all did, that if two thousand tartars stormed all of the fence at the same time, one thousand Americans would soon be dead. The leader wondered whether it would not have been best to leave a larger percent of his force behind the walls of the Fort. Only two-hundred of the older men were there.

At the end of the thirteenth day, just as the sun was sinking, a new group

of men joined the Americans. Stafford and his officers looked rather askance at the leader. He answered the unspoken questions, the ill-concealed antagonism.

"We are from Boston, and we are not what you call Americans. I can talk English, but most of my men talk any other language better. Most of us are from Sicily, and I know you don't like us. We used to be bootleggers and murderers and even white slavers, but when we left Boston, after the city broke, we took our women with us. We tried to behave ourselves, but everyone seemed to be afraid of us. We never had a break; so, we kept on murdering. Then those Huns came, and we had to run. They got our women. Understand? The girls are all dead now, but these men have never paid for them. We have run before them, just waiting for the chance to collect what they owe us. Give us a chance, Mister."

"We will give you a piece of the fence to defend," said Stafford. "You may not be our kind of Americans, but we are glad to have you with us. Perhaps, after the battle is over, we may understand each other better."

"We don't want to fight behind the fence," answered the man. "You fellows understand how to use those bows and arrows, but we have to fight the way we used to fight. We have knives. Understand? Knives. Just stone knives. But we know how to use them. And not one of us but has lost his woman and we want to collect."

"I think you will have a chance," said Stafford kindly. "We will send you some food and drink, and tomorrow you will have the chance to use those knives."

It was dark. Sentinels were pacing the Stone Fence. Here and there along the four miles camp fires were burning as though to show the world that here civilization was quietly preparing for its last stand against barbarism.

Stafford had a final talk with Hubler, who was to bear the responsibility of command till daybreak. Then he slowly walked down to where his horse was picketed. A hostler was petting the horse's nose and whispering to him. Abesnt minded, Stafford mounted the horse, spoke to it, and rode away.

"By-by, old Tiger Killer," whispered the hostler.

Stafford wheeled the horse around.

"Is that you, Dr. Perno? You go right back to the Fort."

"Yes?" asked the voice, and there was a certain soft insolence in the tone. "Yes? Always good at bossing, aren't you? But this time nothing is going to happen. The three of us Medics are here and we are going to stay here, and we are going to do the work of three men and do it better than any three men could do it. You are going to need us, even if you won't admit it."

Stafford galloped off into the darkness.

Chapter XXI The Battle of the North Fence

The next morning was clear. There was no fog, not even a haze over the meadow in front of the stone fence. The Tartars had camped on the far side of the little stream and there everything was activity. On the defensive side of the fence there was not much movement. It was Stafford's

plan to keep the enemy in ignorance of the number and location of the Americans. The fence, nearly seven feet high, had been made a little higher in some places by the addition of large stones placed near each other to give loopholes for the bowmen.

The Delaware men had their catapult near the center of the defence. They were eager to try their strange weapon, but realized that the psychic shock would be greater than any actual damage done and that at the best but few casualties would result from each stone thrown. Still, they had the range accurately determined and were sure they could do some damage.

The Vermont men had been placed in the woods. That was really a place of honor, for there was no stone defence there, and the fighting would be man to man. The Green Mountain boys were anxious to show what they could do, and boasted that they could lick their weight in wild cats.

At the last moment, Stafford had sent one hundred married men back to Fort Telephone. That left less than a thousand to hold the fence. They were divided in groups of fifty, all except the men from Boston. They insisted in their purpose of holding the center of the line.

The morning was half gone when several hundred of the Tartars waded across the creek, came up the hill to within a hundred yards of the fence and then, breaking into small groups, began to shoot arrows into the air. They were expert shots. Soon the arrows began to drop from the air down just in back of the fence. Then it was that the Americans had cause to be thankful for the height of the wall, for, by pressing closely against

the stone fence, the defenders were completely protected from the sky missiles.

Now two other groups crossed the creek and lined alongside of the first two hundred. All advanced till they were within fifty yards of the wall. They began now to shoot for the openings in the top of the stone rampart. There was still no sound, no answering response of any kind from the Americans. The Tartars seemed puzzled. What was on the other side of the fence?

Several hundred more crossed the little creek then. There were at least a thousand Asiatics occupying an area an eighth of a mile wide on each side of the cement road which passed through the gate, but there was no gate left.

Stafford had given rigid orders that nothing was to be done without a signal from him. He appreciated the element of suspense, the value of surprise. The Americans held firm to his orders but the Boston bandits, already hyperemotional, were driven frantic, by the death of their leader. He had peered through a loop hole just at the wrong second and died with a stone pointed arrow in his forehead. They saw him fall, started cursing in Italian and the next minute the entire group, nearly a hundred, were over the fence and running down the meadow.

They were armed with nothing but their flint knives, twelve inches long, sharp as needles at the end, really terrible weapons for in-fighting. They had their left arms wrapped with blankets, intending to use them as shields. They were on the Tartars and into them before the men from Asia realized what was happening.

Stafford saw what the end was going to be. There could only be one answer, but in order to give the Bostonians what aid he could signaled for sharp shooting, careful, selective archery, with a definite target for every arrow. Each man within range was to shoot ten arrows and then stop. The signal was three long blasts on the ox horn.

The Sicilians ran into the men from Tartary and were at once engulfed. It were as though an amoeba had opened up, and, allowing a piece of food to enter, had once again closed its wall. There was not much noise, just a confused struggling, a tossing here and there and a gradual carrying of the entire mass toward the rivulet at the bottom of the slope. At last the fighting came to an end. The men from Boston, the Italian bootleggers, had joined their women, but in their journey they had carried with them the Asiatics. Days later when a careful estimate became possible, it was thought that at least three of the enemy had died for every Sicilian. It was at the most a gesture. In a spiritual sense, it was a supreme sacrifice magnificent in its futility.

Hubler stood by Stafford and watched the assault.

"How is the wind, Paul?" the chief asked, at the same time wetting his finger and holding it up in the air.

"It is wrong in two ways," answered Hubler. "In the first place it is blowing in the wrong direction and in the second place it is not strong enough."

"Yes, until the wind changes."

"I would give anything for an airplane."

"Certainly, and so would I. No use wishing for the moon. Look! There goes a group on horseback headed for the woods. Must be at least fifty in that bunch. Shall we send help to the Vermont men?"

"I think now. They would be insulted. We need every man we have here. Mackson would be insulted. He said he would hold the woods. I think he meant it. Look there! That is one reason why we cannot send help. This looks like a real charge."

It was. Fully a thousand Tartars were running up the cement road. They were going to break over the stone fence, and then spreading out turn back and wipe out the Americans. Stafford ordered the bugler to sound one long blast on the horn. It was the signal for concentration at a threatened point.

The Asiatics were massed. The Delaware men dropped three stones into them, each weighing a hundred pounds. The aim was perfect, but it was like dropping sand into a pond.

And now into the charging mass came the thudding arrows. No time or need for careful aiming. All that was necessary was to aim at the mass. Not an arrow missed a target. Still, they came on toward the wall, up on the wall and over it. Fifty yellow men dropped to the ground and started the Berserk fight with their stone hammers.

The Americans closed in on them, first with long spears, and later, as these broke, with hammer and tomahawk. It was hard, terrible combat; first one large group against another, then a lot of little groups and finally duelists.

Now came the sound of stone mutilating flesh, the sharp breathing of laboring men, the yell and gasp of the mortally wounded. At last it came to an end. The wall was safe. Hundreds of Tartars streamed back to their camp, but hundreds remained, the blood of Asia mingling in little pools with the best blood of America.

Stafford and Hubler, though leading the defence, came through unharmed. They rested on their axes, as they wiped the dripping sweat from faces, blood flecked from their silent enemies. They looked at each other and then at the meadow. A man came up.

"Wish to report that the Vermont men held the woods," he said, and then swaying slightly, dropped dead.

Hubler dropped to his knees and turned the man over.

"It's Mackson," he cried. "They held the woods but I guess they were wiped out in the doing of it."

"Oh! We are holding all right," commented Stafford. "We are holding, but I guess they have a thousand men that so far have not started to fight. If they charge the fence again, it is going to be too bad—for us."

Hubler stood up, wet his finger and held it up toward the sky. For a minute he held it there and then dropped his hand.

"No change in the wind," he said.

"Then we might as well call the men closer together." A man came up.

"We have no more arrows, Boss."

"Sound the horn for assembly. We must have three hundred men who have so far not shot an arrow. They will have to join us."

"That will leave most of the fence unprotected," said the Head of the Delaware men, who had come up just

in time to hear the conversation's end.

"We shall have to take a chance on that. If they flank us, we will have to cut our way through to Fort Telephone. It will be better to fight in a mass than to be cut down piecemeal."

Just then a clap of thunder was heard. Black clouds began to form to the rear of the North Fence. A breeze began to blow.

"It has come," cried Hubler. "Just what we wanted. Now, if our boys can only come in time. If only it works!"

"It has to work!" replied Stafford. "See! The Tartars are forming for another charge. Their entire camp is beginning to cross the creek. Send the signal. An arrow into the air, carrying a white pennant. Quick. Hubler! I cannot see you."

And Stafford dropped to the ground. Hubler was with him as he fell. A woman pushed him away.

"You fool!" she hissed. "Go and do what he told you to. I will tend to him. Must be bleeding somewhere and never knew he was hurt. Probably would have died and nobody known it if he had not fainted."

And Dr. Perno started to find the bleeding point.

And at the same time the signal arrow blazed into the air, vivid against the blackness of the thunder clouds.

The Tartar tribe started up the meadow. All of them this time.

On the other side of the North Fence the Americans waited for the final test of strength; waited for what they felt was only one ending; hoping when every point of common sense told time that the time for optimism had come to an end.

Then from the mountain top on the other side of the wood came something

that looked like a vulture, and another and another, till twelve were soaring in the air. There was no beat of wings simply a careful balancing against the air currents. They came lower and yet lower till they were between the two contending forces; some in the wide meadow between and some over the Asiatics. Now it could be seen that they were not birds but men in gliding machines. And *from the gliders dropped death.*

The Tartars, puzzled, looked up in the air, wondered at what they saw and, too late, started to run. It was useless. On every gust of wind came the living death, curving in wreathing billows like fog from out the sea.

The yellow men ran and died. Most of them died before they came to the creek. The rest died trying to get under the water. In ten minutes it was all over. The flight of the Tartar tribe had come to an end. Starting nearly two years before in Gobi, it beat its last wing stroke at the base of the North Fence.

Once again intelligence had conquered over brute force.

From the top of the stone wall the American watched the debacle in perfect safety. A dozen of the leaders gathered around Hubler as though they expected him to say something. He did.

"It is not the big things in life, gentlemen, that count. I suppose that most decisive battles have been won by some accident, some little thing that no one thought about, like the sunken road at Waterloo. The thing that saved us today, that made America safe for the civilization, was a sudden change in the wind. We could not have used the gliders had the wind not been strong

enough to keep them in the air, and, with the wind blowing as it did before the storm, we would have been killed by the poison gas instead of the Huns. I think the real heroes of the day were the men who used the gliders. Yes, I know we kept it a secret, but we were not at all sure of them, or whether we could use them, and we did not want to disappoint our men. Sailed nicely for crude construction, didn't they? We were lucky to find a lot of poison gas that had been stored in glass demijohns. We tied the demijohns upside down to the gliders and had ropes to the glass corks so they could be pulled out at the right time. It was a new gas the Army was going to experiment with just before the Metal Doom came. Suppose we stop talking and see if we can save any of our wounded?"

"That is all attended to," said Dr. Brown.

Chapter XXII Wreckage

The survivors of the battle were tired, but there were men and women who had remained in Fort Telephone during the battle. These came, as soon as they could be sent for, and helped care for the wounded. Some could be saved but the wounds of a fight in the stone age were different from those in the age of steel, far more disabling and deadly. Yet even the hopelessly wounded were cared for by loving hands. Dr. Brown and Dr. Hufford directed the work of the little field hospital. Dr. Perno had disappeared with the stretcher bearers who had carried Stafford off the field. It seemed that one patient was enough for her.

The field of battle on the other side of the fence could not be investigated.

The poison gas still hung in swirling wreaths and till it was all blown away no one could venture that way. But the leaders knew that all the Boston men were dead, and a search of the woods showed that all of the Green Mountain boys were dead except ten, and of these, five were fatally wounded. The Delaware men had lost twenty of their number. Pennsylvania had seventy who would never return and Stafford's colony had thirty dead. In the emergency hospital that was slowly being filled in one of the barns, over one hundred Americans were being cared for.

The American dead were buried in one long trench back of the fence they had so ably defended. That fence, four miles long, seven feet high and two feet wide was their only monument. During the next week, as soon as the meadow was safe, hundreds of men and horses hauled cord wood down to a large funeral pyre and there the men from Asia were burned. For days the flames, ascending to the skies, sent a message of victory to the western world.

Of the twelve men who had sailed the skies in the hastily constructed gliders, seven came to earth safely back of the American lines. The other five crashed to an earthly death but not till they had contributed their share to the victory.

A month after the battle there was little to show of what had happened. There was an acre of blackened meadow land, but that was later plowed up, harrowed and timothy sown. And there, for all the years to come, grew grass and clover richer than on any other of the Stafford fields. The men from Vermont, Maine, Delaware and Pennsylvania went back to their

homes; some remained in a deep sleep by the North Fence and there shrubs were planted and blossoming flowers, and sweet smelling roses. Twenty years later the National Government made this battlefield a National Park and erected a memorial arch over the gateway, where the concrete road pierced the fence, and on the arch were carved the words:

**"SUCH MEN CAN NEVER
DIE, BUT LIVE ETERNAL
HEROES"**

There was work to be done, extra and unexpected tasks, but at last life returned to normal, and Hubler had time to spend with his family and Stafford.

The Chief had been badly hurt. There was no evidence external of the injury, but he had been struck by a stone ax on the head, a blow that must have been broken by his mat of hair and the leather cap he wore, yet which must have caused a severe concussion. He was asleep for several days and when he did awake he was moody and an extremely poor conversationalist. Everyone was worried about him; all missed his cheerful laugh, and his kindly interest in the little things around him.

"You have to shake out of it, Stafford," urged Hubler. "The Doctor says that you are all right, and Dr. Brown says there is not a thing wrong with you—that you just think you are sick."

"These women Doctors interest me," the sick man replied. "Of course they have been wonderful. They tell me that Brown and Hufford worked miracles in the hospital, and even in

the thick of the fight they were right there doing what they could for the wounded. But I just don't like a female Medico. Once a sick man gets in their hands they seem to think they own him in some way. I suppose it is the Mother instinct in them. I believe I should have been well by now if I had had a man treat me, but somehow when I dropped on the battlefield, Dr. Perno was right there and she has been in the same place ever since. She has been just as nice to me as can be, but I am really tired of having her for my Doctor."

"Why not discharge her?"

"Yes? You know why. What has happened to the other women?"

"You mean those you brought from Shawnee?"

"Yes."

"They are all married. Dr. Brown was the last one to go. She had an interesting case, one of the Vermont men. She saved his life by some kind of an operation, and she was so interested in it that she married him. She said it would take a year to see how the operation turned out and she did not want to lose sight of him in the meantime; so, after the other Vermont men went back, this one stayed on and they were married yesterday. He is a real nice fellow, a college graduate and all that. So, they are all married now except Dr. Perno."

"I wish she would go and marry someone," sighed Stafford wearily. "Why don't you suggest it to her, Paul?"

"Not my business. Why don't you?"

"She might think I was growing personal. I tell you what I am going to do. Wait a few days more till my head is a little clearer and then go

away again. Too many people around here to suit me."

"I don't know where you would go where it is any quieter."

"I do. I bet this minute it is as quiet as can be right at 42nd and Broadway. That is the very idea. Always wanted to see what happened to little old New York since the crash and now I am going to see for myself. Poor old Mackson told us about the curse of the cities but it may not be as bad as he described it."

"Going right away?"

"In a day or two."

"Don't go," pleaded Hubler earnestly. "Nothing there but wreckage!"

"Then that is the place for me. I think that I have made a mess of things. With you it is different; you have Ruth and the little one, and she is certainly a child to be proud of. But with me there is nothing worth while. I guess I was wreckage long before the Metal Doom, but civilization covered up the decay. When we got into the Stone Age I just couldn't make the grade. The other boys did, but I just seemed out of place. At times I felt like a disinterested spectator. I have had just one thrill in all these months and that was when I killed that tiger."

"Didn't it thrill you when those Tartars jumped over the wall? Or don't you remember it. I was too busy to watch you closely, but it looked as though you were having the time of your life."

"Honestly, Paul, I was bored. I tell you there is something wrong with me. I guess I am crumbling into red dust, like the metals."

At that moment Dr. Perno came into the room.

"Here is your eggnog, Mr. Stafford."

"Just a piece of wreckage," sighed Stafford, as he drained the glass.

Chapter XXIII The End of a City

Three days later found Stafford tenting in Central Park. He was in a rather depressed state of mind. While essentially a rural-minded man, he had delighted in his occasional trips to New York City. The park had always fascinated him. The idea of acres of country surrounded by apartment houses whose penthouses almost pierced the clouds intrigued him. When he visited the Metropolis he never failed to spend at least some hours in the little oasis and practice his woodsmanship. To find some wild animal there, if only a skunk or chipmunk, was far greater sport to him than trailing the gold diggers of Broadway.

He had anticipated that the Park would be alive with humanity. At least he was confident that he would find some folks living there. In this thought he completely lost sight of the inability of the average New Yorker to adjust himself to any new situation. While he might be able to rapidly learn the mysteries of the Subway, he never would be able to learn the art of supporting life unless surrounded by cafeterias and delicatessen stores. So, while he found many evidences of past humanity in Central Park he found no present inhabitants.

From the standpoint of housekeeping, the grounds were a pitiful mess. Thousands and hundreds of thousands of people had sought refuge there, abode for a while in makeshift tents

and then, leaving most of their treasures, had wandered on in search of that greatest of all riches, food. Everywhere bones strewed the green grass, mute evidence of past tragedies and hungry dogs. All was chaos, disorder and ruin. Yet, nature was trying her best to restore her domain to its former beauty; the grass was tall, the trees green, and the flowers a riot of color.

On all sides of the Park were buildings in complete collapse. What interested Stafford was the fact that so much of this collapse had taken place internally; the buildings had apparently caved in and, while some of the debris had fallen into the streets, most of it had piled up on the sites of the former buildings. Had there been an accompanying earthquake, hurricane or even a period of high winds, the avenues would have been filled fifty feet high.

The wanderer found a part of the park that seemed cleaner than the rest and pitched his tent. His two horses were picketed and a fire built. Though he was apparently rather isolated, he took every precaution against surprise and attack. Night found a quiet city, except for the howling of distant dogs. The man wondered what had happened to the dogs of New York.

"More dogs than babies here in the Park the last time I was here," he commented to himself.

Towards dark he heard the sound of steps crashing through the weeds. He jumped back of the fire and prepared his bow and quiver of arrows for action. An old man came into view on the other side of the fire. At least he looked like an old man. He looked across the fire and saw the man with

a bow and arrow ready in his hands.

"Don't shoot!" he cried. "I am harmless."

"All right," responded Stafford, "but I am taking no chances."

"That's right. But I live here in the Park. I have lived here since the trains stopped running."

"And I just came," said Stafford.

The two men sat down by the fire.

"My name is O'Connor," began the white-haired man, "And that is a name that anyone can be proud of. I lived over in Jersey, but I worked here in the city, and I used to spend my holidays in the Park. I liked it. Used to think that it belonged to me and hated to see the litter of newspapers and peanut shells and banana peels. Would spend hours picking things up and making the place tidy. When the rush came, the place was a mess. Might have been a million people here, and everything you could imagine in the way of property, and that, with the wild animals running around loose from the Zoo, made the pretty place a regular Inferno like the one Dante described. People went insane and bad in every way, and their sickness was as much spiritual as physical though many of them starved to death.

"I came up here and I stayed. Found a little cave and furnished it with the stuff people dropped, and then, after everybody left, I started to clean the place up. The litter was so thick that you could hardly step on a square yard of clean, healthy grass. I made a regular programme of so many square yards a day and an extra allowance for Saturdays, because I never thought it right to work on Sunday. It was hard work, at least part of it, but I am moving right along. Yes, indeed,

and ten more years will see a nice clean park, believe me, Mr. Stafford."

"That is a remarkable story, Mr. O'Connor. And all by yourself all these months?"

"No. There has been lots of company. There were the dogs."

"Yes, I heard them tonight."

"Funny about them. They cannot leave the city. Looks as though they were afraid to go into the country yet, it is hard to see what they live on—unless?"

"They hunt in packs, do they?"

"Yes, but I do not mind the dogs. When the come at night I am in my cave. It is the Subway people I am afraid of."

"But—didn't the Subways cave in?"

"I suppose some of them did, but much of the system must have held its shape. When the buildings began to give way lots of people went down there. It must have been a dark, unholy hell for a while. Hundreds of thousands of people down there of all kinds and all ages—in the dark—waiting for something to happen.

"I am not sure what did happen. At times I get thinking about it till I nearly go mad and then I start gathering rubbish till I become calm again. But it was a survival of the fittest; not the best, you understand but the kind that were best able to fight it out: and now there is a Bronx gang, and a Circle gang and a Times Square gnag, and I suppose other gnags downtown and over the river."

"Not nice people, I guess," Stafford commented.

"No. Not at all nice. I have seen them pass over Central Park more than once and wanted to kill them, but

what could I do? Yet, I have a plan, and some day I am going to work it out."

"You do not seem to like them?"

"Not at all. If the dogs eat them off one at a time and eat them, it suits me. Dog eat dog."

"Where is your cave?" asked Stafford.

"Up the Drive a way. Must have been there for centuries but no one knew about it. I happened to see a crack and worked around it, and first thing I knew I went inside. Nice little place; even has a spring of water."

"I bet it is clean," laughingly commented the man from the country.

"You bet it is. Come and see me tomorrow night. If you come before sundown, you won't have any trouble finding me. Perhaps you would consider living with me. This place here is bad—if the dogs come."

"How about my horses?"

"There is a fine place for them up on the rocks back of my cave."

"I may come. At least I thank you for the offer, and will think about it. I do not want to make you feel badly but I wanted to be by myself for a while, so I could think things over, and that is why I came here to the city; still, it is nice to have you call, and I want to keep in touch with you."

"I wish you would come," said the old man wistfully. "I have a real nice library."

"I will use it," said Stafford as he said good-night.

The next day the country man rummaged through the remnants of the Broadway shops. He found most in ruins and almost all looted. On the following day he saddled one of the

horses and rode up C.P. West. There were piles of debris on the city side of the street but there was a rather wide, clear space on the park side. Just as he started to turn west to find the O'Connor home, he saw a lone horseman come down the Avenue. He stopped, waiting for the man to come to him. At last the stranger came near enough to make recognition possible.

"Dr. Perno!" cried Stafford. "Whatever are you doing here?"

"Seeing the city."

"Did you know I had come here?"

"Of course not! You don't think I would follow you, do you? I wanted to get some surgical supplies and we women talked it over and decided that I might as well come as anyone else."

"Since you are here," sighed Stafford, "I suppose I will have to be nice to you. Suppose we call on O'Connor?"

Chapter XIV The End of O'Connor

"He is a friend of mine," explained Stafford. "We only met the other day but I liked him from the first. I may go and live with him. He said his cave was on the West Side. Suppose we ride in here and hunt for him? Likely find him at work; he has promised himself that he will clean up the park."

"Does it need cleaning?"

"It does. The whole city does. In fact, you have no business being here by yourself."

"I have always been able to take care of myself!"

"No doubt. But there are some parts of life in New York that would not be very pleasant to you."

As they talked, they rode through the park. The part they saw was very clean. No doubt of the efficiency of O'Connor there. Dr. Perno remarked about it.

"In the old days it was never this clean."

"There is a part over there that the old man overlooked," answered Stafford, as he rode towards a peculiar mass at the foot of a tree.

He jumped off his horse and knelt beside it.

"It's O'Connor!" he gasped, "They have killed him."

The Doctor was instantly by his side, making a careful examination of the body."

"They didn't just kill him," she whispered.

"No. This is torture; it is the work of one of the Subway gangs. He was afraid of them and warned me against them. They must have caught him in a trap of some kind. He didn't have a chance for his life; he was not much of a fighter anyway."

"What are you going to do about it?" asked the woman.

"Bury him first, and then find his cave. And after that clean up the city."

"You mean the Subways?"

"Yes."

"How are you going to do that?"

"I do not know. The old man said he had a plan. Perhaps the cave will show what that plan is. He must have his tools there; so, suppose we find it and then come back?"

The cave was rather cleverly hidden. Stafford was a woodsman and a hunter and he simply tracked the foot treads till they ended in a cunningly concealed opening in a large rock. O'Connor had

been right. The entrance was large enough to admit a horse and the cave itself was ample quarters for several persons and their belongings. It was cleanly and comfortably furnished. A fireplace and blackened rock showed that ample draught was provided by a crack in the wall. Everything necessary for comfort was in the large room; there were even luxuries in the form of books and pictures.

"When we see this place and realize what kind of a man those devils killed, it makes one more determined than ever to make them pay for it!" exclaimed the man.

Meantime Dr. Perno had been rummaging around. She cried. "Look at this stuff. Just like grey candles."

Stafford took a piece to the door to get a better light.

"It is dynamite!" he commented. "Be careful of that candle of yours or you will blow us all up. How much of this stuff is there?"

"At least a hundred pieces."

"That is what he meant when he said he had a plan. He was going to blow up their stairways, and let them die in the trap. I really think that when the time came, he would not have been hard enough to do it. He was a gentle soul."

"Let's go and bury him," said the woman, "and let us plant some flowers on the grave."

They did so. It was nearly sundown when they finished.

"We had better stay in the cave tonight," advised Stafford. "I tented out last night, but the danger is great. We will stay here and I will watch."

"We will take turns," the physician insisted.

But the man insisted on guarding the entrance to the cave til daylight. Then he woke his companion and agreed to go to sleep for a few hours. It seemed only a few minutes of sleep, in reality it was three hours when she woke him.

"There are a lot of men out there," she whispered. "I think they are trying to find the cave. They must have come back, found that the old man was buried and now they are hunting for the ones who buried him."

"Can you shoot?"

"Of course I can."

"Then let's get busy. But first I am going to fix some fuses on a few sticks of dynamite. Ever light a giant firecracker and throw it so it explodes in the air?"

"Yes I used to do that."

"We will try it, if we get in a jam. Suppose we take our arrows and see what we can do?"

Crawling through the doorway, they hid behind the concealing shrubbery. About fifty men were walking around in front of them, evidently hunting something. A few were as close as twenty feet. They were a hard looking lot, and amid their laughter and curses they recalled the slaughter of the previous day and bragged about it.

That was more than Stafford could stand. Motioning to the woman to begin, he fitted an arrow to his bow, took careful aim and let fly. Almost at the same time Dr. Perno fired.

Six men were down before the gangsters knew what was going on. Then they started to run. Stafford came out, and kept on killing. It was clever archery, but in five minutes it was all over.

"Now, Doctor, you go in and get breakfast, and I will go and recover our arrows. I am not sure but I believe the results will go toward proving that you are a good marksman, even if you do use little arrows."

"I did all my practicing on birds and squirrels," she replied, "besides I know the vital parts. Anatomy is a useful study at times."

"You certainly are a peculiar woman!" laughed the man.

"It sounds nice to have you acknowledge that I am a woman," was her reply, "and now I will get breakfast. I do not want to be around—when you get the arrows. And don't forget. They are going to come back."

"I expect that. And when they do, we will be ready for them."

It was an hour before he entered the cave. His face was drawn and haggard. She looked at him inquiringly.

"Seventeen," he said in answer.

"All dead?"

"Yes."

He ate the meal she had prepared in silence and then, without a word, went and started to prepare the dynamite. Somewhere the old man had found the sticks and several hundred feet of fuse. The farmer understood dynamite. More than one day he had spent clearing land, blowing up tree stumps and large rocks. When he finished, he had all the dynamite arranged in three arcs around the mouth of the cave. The ends of the fuses were all bunched together over the cave.

"We are going to stay up here," he exclaimed. "It will be too dangerous in the cave. I am going to take the horses back and hid them. We will hold the rock. They will come here, find the cave, try to open the door,

and will form a large crowd around the entrance. At least I hope they will. Then we will set off the fireworks. We may have to fight for our lives after that, but I doubt it. I think they will be too frightened to do much fighting."

The woman looked serious.

"I suppose you realize that you are planning to kill them without giving them a chance for their lives?" she asked.

"They have done that a thousand times to others. And they did it to my friend."

She sighed.

"This was a pretty place yesterday. It would have been a nice place to spend a vacation."

"We are going to spoil it," retorted Stafford.

"I am not sure that I like you," cried the angry woman. "I believe you delight in making a mess out of things."

He pretended that he did not hear, but went off with the horses.

At noon the mob came, several hundred of them, murder in their hearts. No matter who had done the killing of the morning, they were going to do the killing of the afternoon. There were women in the crowd, brought on by the hope of finery or treasure. They had no trouble this time in finding the door to the cave. Opening it was another matter. The confusion was great. All crowded in, cursing and laughing and hunting for something to kill. Then came a hissing as of dozens of snakes. Some heard it and tried to listen; others saw the sparks in the grass and wondered why they were there.

AND THEN THE EARTH VOMITED.



Dr. Perno and the man lay on the overhanging rock and shut their eyes. Dust filled the air. Here and there were cries, but for the most part, there was an overwhelming silence. A few men ran off into the woods.

"Don't cry, Dotty," whispered Stafford, gathering the trembling woman into his arms.

"I can't help it John," she whispered through her tears. "I came to New York to find something, and now I want to leave."

"Did you find what you wanted?"

"I believe so. What did you come here for?"

"I am not sure that I knew at the time, but I know now."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

That seemed to satisfy the woman. At last she broke the silence.

"I hate the city. I want to get away from it as soon as possible."

"Where shall we go?"

"Why not go to Shawnee?"

"But all your friends are gone from there. We should be alone."

"That is why I want to go there, stupid!" whispered Dotty.

Chapter XXV

Honeymoon

John Stafford and Dotty Perno.

So satisfied were they with the richness of the new experience that had come into their lives, that they were willing to leave all of the wealth of New York for it.

Singly they had come into the great city. Together they had faced great danger and through that danger had been able to find the love they had for each other. Now they were leaving the ruined city together, feeling that nothing could ever part them.

They rode two horses and a third carried their belongings. The weather was beautiful, and, once beyond the city, the country charmed them with its sweetness. Without conference, for they were at that period of life when they spontaneously arrived at the same conclusions without spoken contact, they slowly wore their way down to Port Jervis and from there down the Delaware River Valley to Shawnee. There was no reference made to the past. Everything was just a foregone conclusion. At last they came to a familiar meadow and there part of the veil of illusion snapped.

"I hope," said Stafford, "that we can find another tiger."

"I don't," exclaimed Dotty. "You were just lucky that day. Suppose that beast had killed you? The what would have happened to me? The next tiger you meet I want you to turn your horse around and run for your life."

"You mean you don't want me to kill any more tigers?"

"That's it. No more tigers or bad men or anything. I simply want to forget there is such a thing as death. I have just found out what it means to live and I want to forget everything else for a long, long time. For years, maybe."

"Just want to be happy?"

"That's it."

"Looks as though we ought to be, up here on Hilltop."

The woman smiled as she looked at the man.

"Sure you will be happy up here with me, John?" she asked.

"Certainly."

"Won't want to runaway and spend the evening with Hubler and the other men?"

"I have forgotten that they existed."

"Not sorry that we stopped at that nice old minister's house and were married?"

"Not at all, Dotty?"

"Then we will stay here forever, just the two of us."

"That suits me, Dotty."

"And there will never be a cloud in our life?"

"Not even a little one, except to shade you from the sun, or to make the sky more beautiful."

They came to the house of Dr. Perno. It was very much as they had left it months before. Everything was there; the flowers were a little wilder, the grass a little higher, the birds and squirrels somewhat tamer. Otherwise everything was the same. Up the valley, in the haze of twilight the river lay, a silver streak amid the downy cushions of its protective meadows. To the south the Water Gap held up its twin

mountains in majestic splendor throwing somber, ominous shadows into the darkening gulf between their mighty sides.

It was a pretty place to build a house.

Stafford took care of the horses and silently put their belongings in place, but the former Dr. Perno, the new Dotty Stafford, simply leaned against a pine tree and looked and looked at the country before her.

"I want to live here forever, John!" she cried.

Chapter XXVI A Woman Dies

It was a trifle cold that evening and after supper Stafford built a fire in the large open fireplace. The lovers sat in front of it in happy silence. At last the happy woman said. "Nothing can disturb our happiness."

"But the man, listening, replied with a slight frown as he reached over for his stone ax. "I am not so sure of that. There is someone coming up the walk."

And as he finished, a knocking was heard at the door, and a voice called, "Dr. Perno. Are you there?"

"She is here," answered Stafford. "Who are you and what do you want?"

"I just came down off the mountain. I need a Doctor and they told me there were women Doctors here and that one of them by the name of Doctor Perno lived in the old school house."

"Come right in," invited the woman. "What is the trouble?"

The man came up to the fire. He was a young man, very poorly dressed and shivering from the cold.

"I am Peter Arndt, Madam, and I live up toward the Pocono. When things went wrong the girl and I talked it over and we thought that we would be happier if we were married, even though times were going to be hard. We had a log cabin a little off the road and neighbors were scarce, and none of the city folk came to bother us. Things went better than we had a right to expect, we were doing well and had a nice little herd of cattle, and then—we found there was going to be a baby. My wife's mother came to help and this morning she told me that there had to be a Doctor there—things were not going right—so, I saddled the horse and started out, and you are the first one I could find."

There was not a second's hesitation on the part of Dotty

"Saddle the horses, John," she commanded.

Stafford went to obey her. She went to the closet and started looking over her medical armamentarium. It was not a very pleasing or promising investigation; some drugs, but absolutely nothing in the way of instruments. She started to frown, not at all pleased.

Ten minutes later the three were on their way to the home of Peter Arndt. It was a moonlight night, but even with the light from the full moon it was impossible to go faster than a walk. Daylight was breaking when the ride ended. Dr. Perno took her little bundle and went into the log cabin; the two men stayed outside with the horses; Arndt busied himself with feeding the stock and Stafford tried to help him. Neither man spoke of the drama being enacted inside the little home; it never

occurred to either of them to go inside. The sun rose in the sky and was at last over head. Arndt sat down on a rock.

"Times have changed," he remarked to Stafford. "Sometimes I do not seem to notice it much and then again it is mighty hard. All morning I have been wanting a knife, a real one, with a razor sharp blade."

"What for," asked Stafford.

"Just so I could whittle. Take a time like this and give a man a knife and a piece of old white pine and it's mighty comforting to sit and whittle."

Before Stafford could reply, his wife came out of the cabin. She looked old, and very tired as she called her husband to one side. "I wish you would hunt around for some tools, John, and go up in the woods and dig a nice bed; cover it with golden rod and asters, and then, when you are ready come back," she said.

"Do you mean?" asked Stafford, in a whisper.

"Yes. Both of them."

"Shall I tell the man?"

"No. I will do that. It is part of my work."

Some hours later the two of them rode back to Hilltop, just above Shawnee. The ride was in silence; the supper was in silence. It was not till they sat out in the meadow that either spoke. Then it was the woman who began:

"I never realized what the loss of metal meant to woman before this, John."

"Just what do you mean, Dotty?"

"Simply this. Maternity is no longer a simple process; it has become a pathological condition, but we had

such valuable aids in the metal age, instruments, hypodermics, surgical supplies of all kinds, that we forgot that every child came into the world at a very definite danger to the mother's life. No doubt since we went into the stone age millions of mothers have died—only I did not know about it, and did not have the imagination that was necessary to visualize it.

"The condition last night was not an unusual one. In the old days with my filled obstetrical bag, I should have had not a bit of trouble in saving both the mother and the child. But I was in the stone age. Think of it! The knowledge and science of the age and electricity and the instruments of twenty thousand years ago. There was nothing I could do. Absolutely nothing. So, I just sat there by the bed and watched her die.

"And she is just one of millions of women who are going to die, John. They are going to die, trying in a blind way to fulfill a biologic urge and perpetuate the race. Some will live and more will fail. And I was happy when we came to Hilltop and I never wanted to see anyone, just live on and on with you, and be happy, but I cannot be happy now, because I shall not be able to forget that woman and her little child.

"We have to have metal back into our lives, John Stafford. Not very much of it. We can do without gold and silver and platinum, and we do not need tons and tons of copper and steel; but we need a little, just enough to make a few instruments. Every community must have some, and someone who knows their use, because, otherwise, the culture and refinement and beauty of our race will die out.

(Continued on page 119)

UNDERSEA GUARDIANS

RAY BRADBURY

ILLUSTRATED BY ARNOLD KOHN

We have a salty sea in our bodies that matches the salinity of the ocean from which we came. Perhaps this explains the attraction—and fear—we possess for the thundering seas. With a master's touch, Ray Bradbury leads us into the depths to explore other, unconsidered, possibilities.

THE ocean slept quietly. There was little movement in its deep green silence. Along the floor of a watery valley some bright flecks of orange color swam: tiny arrow-shaped fish. A shark prowled by, gaping its mouth.

An octopus reached up lazily with a tentacle, wiggled it at nothing, and settled back dark and quiet.

Fish swam in and around the rusting, torn hulk of a submerged cargo ship, in and out of gaping holes and ripped





ports. The legend on the prow said:
USS Atlantic.

It was quite soundless. The water formed around the ship like green gelatin.

And then Conda came, with his recruits.

They were swimming like dream-motes through the wide dark-watered valleys of the ocean; Conda at the head of the school with his red shock of hair flurried upright in a current, and his red bush beard trailed down over the massive ribs of his chest. He put out his great arms, clutched water, pulled back, and his long body shot ahead.

The others imitated Conda, and it was very quietly done. The ripple of white arms, cupped hands, the glimmer of quick moving feet, was like the movement of motion pictures from which the sound-track has been cut. Just deep water silence and the mute moves of Conda and his swarm.

Alita came close at his kicking heels. She swam with her sea-green eyes wide-fixed and her dark hair spilling back over her naked body. Her mouth twisted with some sort of agony to which she could give no words.

Alita felt someone moving at her side. Another, smaller, woman, very thin in her nakedness, with gray hair and a shriveled husk of face that held nothing but weariness. She swam too, and would keep on swimming.

And then there was Helene, flashing by over their heads like an instantaneous charge of lightning. Helene with her hot angry eyes and her long platinum hair and her strange laughter.

"How much longer, Conda?" The old woman's thought reached through the waters, touching the brains of them

all as they swam.

"An hour. Perhaps only forty minutes!" came Conda's blunt retort. It had the depth of fathoms in it; dark like the tides in the sunken water lands.

"Watch out!" somebody cried.

Down through the green waters overhead something tumbled. A shadow crossed the ocean surface, quick, like a gigantic sea-gull.

"Depth-charge!" shouted Conda. "Get away from it!"

Like so many frightened fish the twenty of them scattered instantly, with a flurry of legs, a spreading of arms, a diving of heads.

The depth-charge ripped water into gouts and shreds, spread terrific vibrations down to kick the sandy bottom, up to ram the surface like a geyser!

Alita screamed to herself as she sank, stunned, to the sea-floor, a queer strange pain going through her limbs. If only this were over, if only the real death came. If only it were over.

A shivering went through her. Quite suddenly the water was icy cold, and she was alone in the green emptiness. So very alone. Alone, staring at a dark ring on her left hand.

"Richard, I want to see you again so very much. Oh, Richard, if we could only be together."

"Daughter." The gentle thought husked at her as the old woman glided up, white hair misting around her wrinkled face. "Don't. Don't think. Come along. There's work. Work to be done. Much of it. Work for you and me and the ships on the surface, and for—for Richard."

Alita didn't move. "I don't want to swim. I'd rather just sit here on

the sand and . . . wait."

"You know you can't do that."

The old woman touched her. "You'd be all the unhappier. You have a reason to swim or you wouldn't be swimming. Come along. We're almost there!"

The effects of the depth-charge, dropped from a low-flying airplane, had dispersed. Mud-streaks boiled up fogging the water, and there were a million air bubbles dancing toward the outer world like laughing diamonds. Alita let the old woman take her hand and tug her up from the sand floor. Together they progressed toward Conda, who was the nucleus of a growing congregation.

"Submarine!" somebody thought, in a tense whisper. "Over that crop of coral ahead. That's why the airplane dropped the depth-charge!"

"What kind of submarine?" someone else asked.

"German," said Conda grimly. His red beard wavered in the water and his red-rimmed eyes stared out with iron fury. Helene flicked by them all, swiftly, laughing. "A German submarine lying on the bottom, sleeping quietly—waiting for the *convoy*!"

Their minds swirled at the words of Conda, like so many warm-cold currents intermixing with fear and apprehension.

"And the *convoy* will pass this spot in how long?"

"Half an hour at most, now."

"Then there isn't much time, is there?"

"Not much."

"Isn't it dangerous for us to be near it? What if the airplane returns with more depth-charges?"

Conda growled. "This is the limit to the plane range. That plane won't be back. He's out of bombs and out of gas. It's our job now. And what of it? You afraid?"

Silence.

The ring of faces looked to Conda for the plan, Alita among them; fourteen men, six women. Men with beards grown out four, five months; hair long and unshorn about their ears. Pallid watery faces with determined bone under the skin, set jaws and tightened fists. All gathered like fragment of some oceanic nightmare. The pallid undead, breathing water, and thinking mute thoughts about the stormy night when the *USS Atlantic* had been torpedoed and sent to the bottom, with all of them trapped, screaming, inside her.

"We never had our chance," said Conda, grimly, "to get where we were going to do what we had to do. But we'll go on doing it until the war's over because that's all that's worth while doing. I don't know how we live or what makes us live except the will to fight, the will to vengeance, wanting to win—not wanting to lie on the coral shelves like so much meat for the sharks—"

Alita listened and shuddered. Why was she still alive and swimming forty fathoms under?

And then she knew. It was like sudden flame in her. She lived because she loved Richard Jameson. She lived simply because his ship might pass this way some day soon again, like it had three weeks ago, returning from England. And she might see him leaning on the rail, smoking his pipe and trying to smile, still alive.

She lived for that. She lived to keep him safe on every trip. Like the others, she had a purpose, a hot, constricting, unquenchable purpose to prevent more victims from coming down to join her in the same nightmare fashion as the *USS Atlantic*. She guessed that explained everything. There was good reason for her still to be moving, and somehow God had motivated them all in the green see-weed plateaus and gullies.

"Now," came Conda's heavy thought, "we've this German submarine to consider. We have to knock it out of action completely. We can't have it lying here when the convoy comes. Alita—"

Alita jerked. She came out of her thoughts, and her pale lips moved. "Yes?"

"You know what to do, Alita? And . . . Helene?"

Helene drifted down dreamily, laughing in answer, and opening white fingers to clench them tight.

"It's up to you, Alita and Helene. The rest of us will deploy around the submarine. Jones, you and Merrith try to jam the torpedo openings somehow. Acton, you work on the induction valves. Simpson, see what you can do to the guns on deck; and Haines, you and the other men try your damndest with the periscope and conning tower."

"Yes, sir."

"Good enough, sir."

"If we do it, this'll be the sixth sub for us—"

"If we do it," said Conda.

"Alita'll do it for us, won't you Alita?"

"What? Oh, yes. Yes! I'll do it." She tried to smile.

"All right then." Conda swung about. Spread out and go in toward the submarine under a smoke-screen. Deploy!"

Silently the congregation split into twos and threes and swam toward the coral shelf, around it, then sank to the bottom, scooped up great handfuls of mud and darkened the water with it. Alita followed, cold, tired, unhappy.

The submarine squatted on the bottom like a metal shark, dark and wary and not making a sound. Sea-weed waved drowsy fronds around it, and several curious blue-fish eyed, it and fluttered past. Sunshine slanted down through water, touching the gray bulk, making it look prehistoric, primeval.

A veil of mud sprang up as the cordon of Conda's people closed in around the U-boat. Through this veil their pasty white bodies twisted, naked and quick.

Alita's heart spasmed its cold grave-flesh inside her. It beat salt water through her arteries, it beat agony through her veins. There, just a few feet from her through the mud-veil lay an iron-womb, and inside it grown-up children stirred, living. And out here in the cold deeps nothing lived but the fish.

Conda and Alita and the others didn't count.

The submarine, a metal womb, nurturing those men, keeping the choking, hungry waters from them. What a difference a few inches of metal made between pink flesh and her own white flesh, between living and not living, between laughing and crying. All of that air inside the submarine. What would it be like to gasp it in again, like the

old days just a few scant weeks ago. What would it be like to suck it in and mouth it out with talked words on it? To *talk* again!

Alita grimaced. She kicked her legs. Plunging to the U-boat, she beat her fists against it, screaming, "Let me in! Let me in! I'm out here and I want to live! Let me in!"

"Alita!" The old woman's voice cried in her mind. A shadow drew across her lined face, softening it. "No, no, my child, do not think of it! Think only of what must be done!"

Alita's handsome face was ugly with torture.

"Just one breath! Just one song!"

"Time shortens, Alita. And the convoy comes! The submarine must be smashed—now!"

"Yes," said Alita wearily. "Yes. I must think of Richard—if he should happen to be in this next convoy—" Her dark hair surged in her face. She brushed it back with white fingers and stopped thinking about living again. It was needless torture.

She heard Helene's laughter from somewhere. It made her shiver. She saw Helene's nude body flash by above her like a silver fish, magnificent and graceful as a wind-borne thistle. Her laughter swam with her. "Open the U-boat up! Open it up and let them out and I'll make love to a German boy!"

There were lights in the submarine. Dim lights. Alita pressed her pale face against the port and stared into a crew's quarters. Two German men lay on small bunks, looking at the iron ceiling doing nothing. After a while one puckered his lips, whistled, and rolled out of the bunk to disappear through a small iron door. Alita nodded. This

was the way she wanted it. The other man was very young and very nervous, his eyes were erratic in a tired face, and his hair was corn-yellow and clipped tight to his head. He twisted his hands together, again and again, and a muscle in his cheek kept jerking.

Light and life, a matter of inches away. Alita felt the cold press of the ocean all around her, the beckoning urge of the cold swells. Oh, just to be inside, living and talking like them . . .

She raised her tiny fist, the one with Richard's thick ring on it, from Annapolis, and struck at the port. She struck four times.

No effect.

She tried again, and knew that Helene would be doing the same on the opposite side of the sub.

The Annapolis ring clicked against thick port glass.

Jerking, the German lad pulled his head up half an inch and stared at the port, and looked away again, went back to twisting his fingers and wetting his lips with his tongue.

"I'm out here!" Alita struck again and again. "Listen to me! Listen! I'm out here!"

The German sat up so violently he cracked his head against metal. Holding his forehead with one hand he slipped out of the bunk and stepped to the port.

He squinted out, cupping hands over eyes to see better.

Alita smiled. She didn't feel like smiling, but she smiled. Sunlight sprang down upon her dark smoke-spirals of hair dancing on the water. Sunlight stroked her naked white body.

She beckoned with her hands, laughing.

For one unbelieving, stricken instant, it was as if hands strangled the German lad. His eyes grew out from his face like unhealthy gray things. His mouth stopped retching and froze. Something crumbled inside him. It seemed to be the one last thing to strike his mind once and for all insane.

One moment there, the next he was gone. Alita watched him fling himself back from the port, screaming words she couldn't hear. Her heart pounded. He fought to the door, staggering out. She swam to the next port in time to see him shout into the midst of a sweating trio of mechanics. He stopped, swayed, swallowed, pointed back to the bunk room, and while the others turned to stare in the designated direction, the young German ran on, his mouth wide, to the entrance rungs of the conning tower.

Alita knew what he was yelling. She spoke little German; she heard nothing; but faintly the waves of his mind impinged on hers, a screaming insanity:

"God! Oh God! She's outside. And she is swimming! And alive!"

The sub captain saw him coming. He dragged out a revolver and fired, point-blank. The shot missed and the two grappled.

"God! Oh God! I can't stand it longer! Months of sleeping under the sea! Let me out of this god-damned nightmare! Let me out!"

"Stop! Stop it, Schmidt! Stop!"

The captain fell under a blow. The younger man wrested the gun from him, shot him three times. Then he jumped on the rungs to the conning

tower, and twisted at mechanisms.

Alita warned the others. "Be ready! One is coming out! He's coming out! He's opening the inner door!"

Instantly, breathlessly, passionately, Helene's voice rang: "To hell with the inner door! It's the outer door we want open!"

"God in heaven, let me out! I can't stay below!"

"Stop him!"

The crew scrambled. Ringing down, the inner door peeled open. Three Germanic faces betrayed the biting fear in their bellies. They grabbed instruments and threw them at Schmidt's vanishing legs jumping up the rungs!

Conda's voice clashed like a thrust gong in the deep sunlit waters. "Ready, everyone? If he gets the outer door open, we must force in to stop the others from ever closing it!"

Helene laughed her knifing laughter. "I'm ready!"

The submarine stirred and rolled to a strange gurgling sound. Young Schmidt was babbling and crying. To Alita, he was now out of sight. The other men were pouring pistol shots up into the conning tower where he'd vanished, to no effect. They climbed after him, shouting.

A gout of water hammered down, crushed them!

"It's open!" Helene exulted. "It's open! The outer seal is free!"

"Don't let them slam it again!" roared Conda. White bodies shot by, flashing green in the sunlight. Thoughts darkened, veiling like unsettled mud.

Inside the machine-room, the crew staggered in a sloshing, belching nightmare of thrusting water. There was churning and thrashing and shaking like the interior of a gigantic wash-

ing machine. Two or three crew-men struggled up the rungs to the inner lock and beat at the closing mechanism.

"I'm inside!" Helene's voice was high, excited. "I've got him—the German boy! Oh, this is a new kind of love, this is!"

There was a terrific mental scream from the German, and then silence. A moment later his dangling legs appeared half in, half out of the lock as the door started to seal! Now it couldn't seal. Yanking desperately, the crew beneath tried to free him of the lock, but Helene laughed dimly and said, "Oh, no, I've got him and I'm keeping him here where he'll do the most good! He's mine. Very much mine. You can't have him back!"

Water thundered, spewed. The Germans floundered. Schmidt's limbs kicked wildly, with no life, in the steadily descending torrent. Something happened to release him. The lock rattled open and he fell face down into the rising waters.

Something came with him. Something white and quick and naked. Helene.

Alita watched in a numbed sort of feeling that was too weary to be horror.

She watched until there were three Germans left, swimming about, keeping their heads over water, yelling to God to save them. And Helene was in among them, invisible and stroking and moving quickly. Her white hands flickered up, grasped one officer by the shoulders and pulled him steadily under.

"This is a different kind of love! Make love to me! Make love! Don't you like my cold lips?"

Alita swam off, shuddering, away from the fury and yelling and corruption. The submarine was dying, shaking its prehistoric bulk with metal agony. In another moment it would be drowned and the job done. Silence would come down again and sunlight would strike on the dead, quiet U-boat and another attack would be successful.

Sobbing, Alita swam up toward the sun in the green silence. It was late afternoon, and the water became warmer as she neared the surface. Late afternoon. Back in Forest Hills they'd be playing tennis now on the hot courts, drinking cool cocktails, talking about dancing tonight at the Indigo Club. Back in Forest Hills they'd be deciding what formal to wear tonight to that dance, what show to see. Oh, that was so long ago in the sanity of living, in the time before torpedoes crushed the hull of the *USS Atlantic* and took her down.

Richard, where are you now? Will you be here in a few minutes, Richard, with the convoy? Will you be thinking of us and the day we kissed goodbye in New York at the harbor, when I was on my way to nursing service in London? Will you remember how we kissed and held tight, and how you never saw me again?

I saw you, Richard. Three weeks ago. When you passed by on Destroyer 242, oblivious to me floating a few feet under the water!

If only we could be together. But I wouldn't want you to be like this, white and sodden and not alive. I want to keep you from all this, darling. And I shall. That's why I stay moving, I guess. Because I know I can help keep you living. We just killed a sub-

marine, Richard. It won't have a chance to harm you. You'll have a chance to go to Britain, to do the things we wanted to do *together*.

There was a gentle movement in the water, and the old woman was at her side.

Alita's white shoulders jerked. "It—it was awful."

The old woman looked at the sun caught in the liquid. "It always is—this kind of death. It always has been—always will be as long as men are at war. We had to do it. We didn't take lives, we saved lives—hundreds of them."

Alita closed her eyes and opened them again. "I've been wondering about us. Why is it that just you and I and Conda and Helene and a few other survived the sinking. Why didn't some of the hundreds of others join us? What are we?"

The old woman moved her feet slowly, rippling currents.

"We're Guardians, that's what you'd call us. A thousand people drowned when the *Atlantic* went down, but twenty of us came out, half-dead, because we have somebody to guard. You have a lover on the convoy routes. I have four sons in the Navy. The others have similar obligations. Conda has sons too. And Helene—well, her lover was drowned inside the *Atlantic* and never came half-alive like us, so she's vindictive, motivated by a great vengeance. She can't ever really be killed.

"We all have a stake in the convoys that cross and recross the ocean. We're not the only ones. Maybe there are thousands of others who cannot and will not rest between here and England, breaking seams in German cargo

boats, darkening Nazi periscopes and frightening German crewmen, sinking their gun-boats when the chance comes.

"But we're all the same. Our love for our husbands and sons and daughters and fathers makes us go on when we should be meat for fish, makes us go on being Guardians of the Convoy, gives us the ability to swim faster than any human ever swam while living, as fast as any fish ever swam. Invisible guardians nobody'll ever know about or appreciate. Our urge to do our bit was so great we wouldn't let dying put us out of action . . ."

"I'm so tired, though," said Alita. "So very tired."

"When the war is over—we'll rest. In the meanwhile—"

"*The convoy is coming!*"

It was Conda's deep voice of authority. Used to giving captain's orders for years aboard the *Atlantic*, he appeared below them now, about a hundred yards away, striving up in the watered sunlight, his red hair aflame around his big-nosed, thick-lipped face. His beard was like so many living tentacles, writhing.

The convoy!

The Guardians stopped whatever they were doing and hung suspended like insects in some green primordial amber, listening to the deeps.

From far, far off it came: the voice of the convoy. First a dim note, a lazy drifting of sound, like trumpets blown into eternity and lost in the wind. A dim vibration of propellers beating water, a bulking of much weight on the sun-sparkled Atlantic tides.

The convoy!

Destroyers, cruisers, corvettes, and cargo ships. The great bulking convoy!

Richard! Richard! Are you with them?

Alita breathed water in her nostrils, down her throat, in her lungs. She hung like a pearl against a green velvet gown that rose and fell under the breathing of the sea.

Richard!

The echo of ships became more than a suggestion. The water began to hum and dance and tremble with the advancing armada. Bearing munitions and food and planes, bearing hopes and prayers and people, the convoy churned for England.

Richard Jameson!

The ships would come by like so many heavy blue shadows over their heads and pass on and be lost soon in the night-time, and tomorrow there would be another and another stream of them.

Alita would swim with them for a way. Until she was tired of swimming, perhaps, and then she'd drop down, come floating back here to this spot on a deep water tide she knew and utilized for the purpose.

Now, excitedly, she shot upward.

She went as near to the surface as she could, hearing Conda's thunder-voice giving commands'

"Spread out! One of you to each major ship! Report any hostile activity to me instantly! We'll trail with them until after sunset! Spread!"

The others obeyed, rising to position, ready. Not near enough to the surface so the sun could get at their flesh.

They waited. The hammer-hammer churn-churn of ships folded and grew

upon itself. The sea brimmed with its bellow going down to kick the sand and striking up in reflected quivers of sound. Hammer-hammer-churn!

Richard Jameson!

Alita dared raise her head above water. The sun hit her like a dull hammer. Her eyes flicked, searching, and as she sank down again she cried, "Richard. It's his ship. The first destroyer. I recognize the number. He's here again!"

"Alita, please," cautioned the old woman. "Control yourself. *My* boy too. He's on one of the cargo ships. I know its propeller voice well. I recognize the sound. One of my boys is here, near me. And it feels so very good."

The whole score of them swam to meet the convoy. Only Helene stayed behind. Swimming around and around the German U-boat, swimming swiftly and laughing her strange high laughter that wasn't sane.

Alita felt something like elation rising in her. It was good, just to be this close to Richard, even if she couldn't speak or show herself or kiss him ever again. She'd watch him every time he came by this way. Perhaps she'd swim all night, now, and part of the next day, until she couldn't keep up with him any longer, and then she'd whisper goodbye and let him sail on alone.

The destroyer cut close to her. She saw its number on the prow in the sun. And the sea sprang aside as the destroyer cut it like a glittering knife.

There was a moment of exhilaration, and then Conda shouted it deep and loud and excited:

"*Submarine!* Submarine coming from north, cutting across convoy! German!"

Richard!

Alita's body twisted fearfully as she heard the under-water vibration that meant a submarine was coming in toward them, fast. A dark long shadow pulsed underwater.

There was nothing you could do to stop a moving submarine, unless you were lucky. You could try stopping it by jamming its propellers, but there wasn't time for that.

Conda yelled, "Close in on the sub! Try to stop it somehow! Block the periscope. Do anything!"

But the German U-boat gnashed in like a mercurial monster. In three breaths it was lined up with the convoy, unseen, and squaring off to release its torpedoes.

Down below, like some dim-moving fantasy, Helene swam in eccentric circles, but as the sub shadow trailed over her she snapped her face up, her hot eyes pulled wide and she launched herself with terrific energy up at it, her face blazing with fury!

The ships of the convoy moved on, all unaware of the poisoned waters they churned. Their great valvular hearts pounding, their screws thrashing a wild water song.

"Conda, do something! Conda!" Alita shivered as her mind thrust the thoughts out at the red-bearded giant. Conda moved like a magnificent shark up toward the propellers of the U-boat, swift and angry.

Squirted, bubbling, jolting, the sub expelled a child of force, a streamlined torpedo that kicked out of its metal

womb, trailed by a second, launched with terrific impetus—at the destroyer.

Alita kicked with her feet. She grasped at the veils of water with helpless fingers, blew all the water from her lungs in a stifled scream.

Things happened swiftly. She had to swim at incredible speed just to keep pace with submarine and convoy. And—spinning a bubbled trail of web—the torpedoes coursed at the destroyer as Alita swam her frantic way.

"It missed! Both torps missed!" someone cried; it sounded like the old woman.

Oh, Richard, Richard, don't you know the sub is near you. Don't let it bring you down to . . . this, Richard! Drop the depth charges! Drop them now!

Nothing.

Conda clung to the conning tower of the U-boat, cursing with elemental rage, striving uselessly.

Two more torpedoes issued from the mouths of the sub and went surging on their trajectories. Maybe—

"Missed again!"

Alita was gaining. Gaining. Getting closer to the destroyer. If only she could leap from the waters, shouting If only she were something else but this dead white flesh . . .

Another torpedo. The last one, probably, in the sub.

It was going to hit!

Alita knew that before she'd taken three strokes more. She swam exactly alongside the destroyer now, the submarine was many many yards ahead when it let loose its last explosive. She saw it come, shining like some new kind of fish, and she knew the range

was correct this time.

In an instant she knew what there was to be done. In an instant she knew the whole purpose and destiny of her swimming and being only half-dead. It meant the end of swimming forever, now, the end of thinking about Richard and never having him for herself ever again. It meant—

She kicked her heels in the face of water, stroked ahead clean, quick. The torpedo came directly at her with its blunt, ugly nose.

Alita coasted, spread her arms wide, waited to embrace it, take it to her breast like a long-lost lover.

She shouted it in her mind:

'Helene! Helene! From now on—from now on—take care of Richard for me! Watch over him for me! Take care of Richard—!"

"Submarine off starboard!"

"Ready depth-charges!"

"Torpedo traces! Four of them! Missed us!"

"Here comes another one! They've got our range this time, Jameson! Watch it!"

To the men on the bridge it was the last moment before hell. Richard Jameson stood there with his teeth clenched, yelling, "Hard over!" but it was no use; that torp was coming on, not caring, not looking where it was going. It would hit them amidship! Jameson's face went white all over and he breathed something under his breath and clutched the rail.

The torpedo never reached the destroyer.

It exploded about one hundred feet from the destroyer's hull. Jameson fell to the deck, swearing. He waited. He

staggered up moments later, helped by his junior officer.

"That was a close one, sir!"

"What happened?"

"That torp had our range, sir. But they must have put a faulty mechanism in her. She exploded short of her goal. Struck a submerged log or something."

Jameson stood there with salt spray-ing his face. "I thought I saw something just before the explosion. It looked like a . . . log. Yeah. That was it. A log."

"Lucky for us, eh, sir?"

"Yeah. Damn lucky."

"Depth-charge! Toss 'em!"

Depth-charges were dropped. Moments later a subwater explosion tore up the water. Oil bubbled up to color the waves, with bits of wreck-age mixed in it.

"We got the sub," someone said.

"Yeah. And the sub almost got us!"

The destroyer ran in the wave chan-nels, in the free wind, under a darkening sky.

"Full speed ahead!"

The ocean slept quiet as the convoy moved on in the twilight. There was little movement in its deep green silence. Except for some things that may have been a swarm of silver fish gathered below, just under the waters where the convoy had passed; pale things stirring, flashing a flash of white, and swimming off silently, strangely, into the deep green soundlessness of the undersea valleys . . .

The ocean slept again.

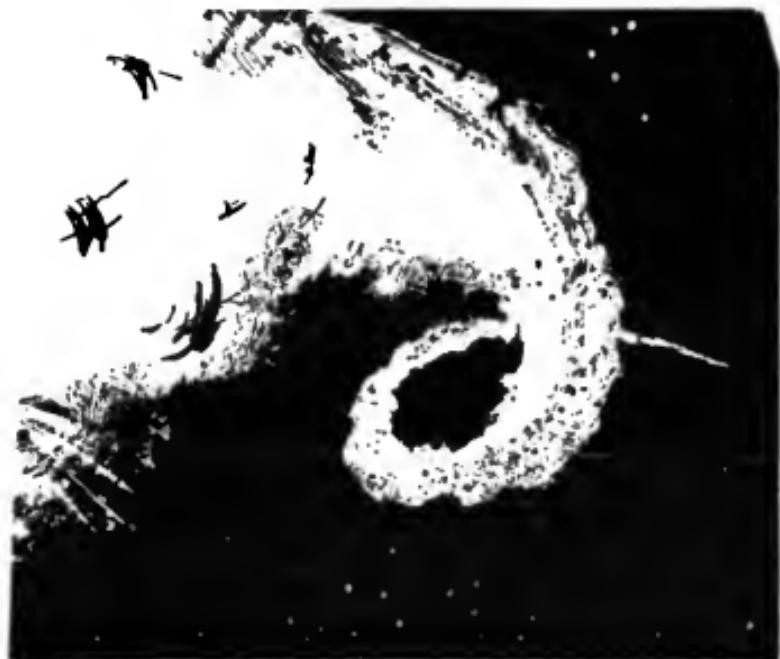
The End



THEY FLY SO HIGH

ROSS ROCKLYNNE

ILLUSTRATED by DAVID STONE



Do words have a power never considered or understood? The Professor thought so—and did something about proving it.

DORNLEY seated in the galley of the galloping spaceship with his prisoner, was struck with a queer impression. Actually, Dr. Waldo Skutch was not worried that he had been ousted at point of gun from Callisto.

"I could vacuum out another cup of coffee for you, sir—" Dornley had been taught to be polite at the Space Academy, even to dangerous criminals—"but then you *don't* seem to be nervous or worried, do you?" he said, thinking this was the best way to get

a response from his prisoner. Besides, August Dornley felt he *did* have an inquiring mind. Skutch, the authorities said, was planning the overthrow of the entire human race. Why? Where was his criminal base located? What was the nature of the secret arsenal of new weapons he was making? Good questions. Find the answers. Get into Skutch's confidence.

"Nervous?" boomed Skutch, transfixing Dornley with his pale strange eyes over which the cliffs of gray hair

hung. "Worried? My dear young Lieutenant Dornley, worry is a special affection of the human race, an unnecessary evil of the mind for which they have great love. Worry is of the future; I, Skutch am of the present." He touched his barrel-chest with a large, curved thumb.

"You don't consider yourself of the human race, sir?" This certainly was a question some clever interrogator would ask Skutch when he faced trial.

"I am of the human race; my physical body proves it, unfortunately. But as long as my mind functions, my chances of becoming unhuman are excellent, most excellent!" Skutch let go of his coffee cup to tap his great forehead, over which the disheveled coarse grey hair hung. "Brains, young man, brains. You are of the human race, and no doubt proud of it. But what have you done with your brains?"

Dornley would not let himself be irritated by this old man with the strange eyes. He smiled. "I got through the Space Academy in record time with top honors," he said. "If I hadn't had some kind of unusual merit, I would have been sent to the frontlines in one of the war-ships. Instead, I was ranked up to Special Duty."

"And of that use of your brains you are proud!"

"Well, let's see," said Dornley, touched off a little. "I tracked you down to Callisto. I fooled you into leaving your ship. Then I set up a random-firing booby-gun, and caught you from behind. When it comes to a question of brains—"

Skutch threw back his great tattered head and laughed. His laughs were muted, gleeful squeals. Finally he stopped.

"Don't you think I knew I could not escape capture?" he demanded. "Now, let me ask you what happened to your ship."

Dornley's healthy tanned face showed a flush. "You blasted it," he admitted. "So what's the difference? We're using yours."

Skutch abruptly leaned across the table on his elbows, staring intently at Dornley. "You do have brains," he said in the gentlest tone he had used so far. "But you have not been taught to think. *Think, young man, think.* I, Skutch, do not worry about the future. But that does not mean that I do not consider the possibilities and the probabilities of the future. Now, can you *think*?"

Dornley was nettled at first. Then he felt distinct alarm. His training made him sit quietly, but it also made his hand inevitably grip the handle of his Biow thermo-gun.

"I'll make a guess," he said steadily. "This ship itself is a booby-trap."

Suddenly he did get up, leaning his lank body over his chair to reach the galley vision disks. Jupiter showed one sweeping section of its baleful perimeter. He widened the aperture. Jupiter jumped back, showing itself in its entirety as a bulky, mottled orange. Around it stars lay thickly. Dornley rotated the pick-up through 180 degrees for all three coordinates. Japetus lay twenty minutes behind. The other satellites shown dimly.

Along the bottom of the disks, no pips of brilliance showed. There were no other ships in the area. Attack was ruled out, but so was the possibility of rescue.

He shut off the mechanism, faced Skutch quietly.

"So it's in the ship. Probably an explosive that you rigged into the fuel beforehand, primed to trigger off after a certain interval—unless you were free to unrig it." He could feel sweat trickling down his armpits. "I can also assume that there's nothing to be done about it at this late date, otherwise you wouldn't have tipped me off."

"Now," said Skutch, grinning widely, "you are thinking. But not enough. You really don't think I would arrange my own death. Actually, I would. My work is well on its way. It is left in capable hands. I wouldn't be missed for long. So I am prepared to let the ship blow up with us in it if you do not move quickly."

Count to ten. Dornley said evenly. "You virtually admit you are conspiring against humanity. This doesn't sound very much like the idealized picture of yourself, Dr. Skutch, as a superior human. Earth uses science to make war, a war that is inevitable and must be fought. You plan to use superior science to overcome both victor and loser. Is that correct? Am I thinking?" He tossed the last out with bitter sarcasm, then turned on his long legs and went aft fast. He came back with two boxed pressure-suits, the supra-lux type that would withstand, if necessary, fifteen thousand atmospheric pressures.

"You are thinking," said Skutch, frowning heavily at him as he ripped open the boxes, "with the lower half of your body."

Dornley, thin-lipped, ignored him utterly. Skutch rumbled on: "Science! Pah!" He almost spat. "Science is a toy, a plaything. And I am a criminal because I desert my enforced task as toymaker. I am tracked down because

it is feared I am conspiring against authority. I am to be tried and sentenced and forced to conceive of more ingenious toys. Tried by men who are unconscious automatons, men who think only the thoughts of others." He fell silent.

The boxes opened up; the pressure suits came out, fat dull things looking like blown-up corpses.

Skutch surveyed them interestedly. "Perhaps we do not have enough time," he said gravely. "Will five minutes do?"

Dornley worked twice as fast, sweating, checking air vents and controls, examining the pins of the gravity units, making sure the food and water units were full and operating. Skutch observed this thoroughness with great approval.

"You can think," he said, nodding his great grey head. "But, here without a spirit of revenge motivating me, perhaps you have here an excellent example of how the free individual can manipulate the Universe. I, Skutch, am manipulating you, am manipulating this ship, am manipulating events—even though I am chained to this table. Wouldn't you give much for such an accomplishment?"

"I'd give much if you'd shut up, Dr. Skutch," Dornley said firmly. Skutch shrugged his heavy old shoulders. "Now, get into this suit."

Dornley unchained him and helped him in, bolting down the solid, transparent supra-lux visor. Skutch choked a little, Dornley readjusted the intake of oxygen. Thirty-nine seconds later they shot out from the airlock and Skutch, handcuffed to Dornley, was dryly complimenting him for a fast piece of work.

Ten seconds later, several large cracks abruptly appeared in the slim black ship's hull. Through these cracks, and through the shattered ports, was seen a glow of fuming violence. Billious yellow gases escaped under pressure, swiftly expanded to the point of invisibility. The numerous cracks in the hull became a little larger, that was all. They began moving, under their own velocity, farther and farther away until the derelict was gone.

Dornley was depressed and silent. Actually, he could blame himself and a certain amount of inexperience for having fallen into a trap. Skutch was a wise old bear; and, it appeared, he understood human nature. Looking down at giant Jupiter—that immense planet did determine where *down* was—he was almost sure it would have been better to take a quick death in the ship.

"Jupiter," mused Skutch. His voice came through the radio receiver with its booming quality strained out. "Jupiter, giant of the System, a mighty creature, an aged old man. Jupiter, my friend, I salute you. Soon we shall meet."

Dornley said nothing. Skutch said, "You did not know, I suppose, that Jupiter is alive?"

Dornley turned his head until his face was against Skutch's. He was sure he was looking at a crazy old man. But Skutch grinned hugely, his grey whiskers protruding around his mouth like those of a tiger.

"I have trapped you, young man. You are, it would appear, much worse off than I expected. You would make the statement, flatly, that Jupiter does *not* live. Your mind is fettered. You are chained to dogma.

Other minds tell you what to think. Perhaps I should discard you." He sighed heavily, but calculatingly.

Dornley said flatly, "Jupiter is *not* alive."

"You see?" Skutch's free arm appealed to the cold stars. "If only he had said 'I do not have sufficient material on which to base an opinion. Jupiter *may* be alive.'"

Dornley smiled wanly. "Men have landed on Jupiter. They've built Jupiter City up near the Red Spot. They haven't detected a heart-beat, or breathing. But I'll grant you the point. He might be alive in other ways."

"Good, good," applauded Skutch. "You are showing signs of improvement. Understand me, young man. Sometimes I make flat statements which I do not know to be true. But there are merely for testing people."

"Which people?"

"All people," said Skutch solemnly. "I have my life work which you do not yet know about. I am, you would say at your present level of understanding, creating an ultimate weapon, a weapon so powerful that none will stand against it. For this I would be damned, sentenced to death if the Terrestrial Court ever got hold of me, which they shall not. We are falling now."

They were indeed falling. The planet's powerful drag had finally overcome their momentum outward; the meter in the wrist of Dornley's pressure suit, accurately judging the changing shifts of satellite and planetary gravities, gave them an accelerating velocity. They would, at this rate, hit the planet's atmosphere in eight hours. No good. Every hour, at least, they would have to adjust the gravity units built in-

to the suits to cut their speed down. Dornley, attached to his strange companion, stared down at that broad orange, yellow, and red monster of the sky. Vagrant fear-thoughts floated to the surface of his mind. He knew he should be screaming with terror. They were alone out here, detached from things, living with a finality equal to death. His heart beat a little faster; his breathing stepped up. He began to think of himself as still a young punk, with a long and satisfactory life not yet ready to be cut short. He sweated.

"Dr. Skutch," he said hoarsely, "how do you do it? Why aren't you afraid?"

"Afraid?" Skutch's voice was astonished. Then it became very soft and gentle. "I understand, young man," he said. "You are worried. You think we will not live. And why is this?"

The question was gently problling.

Dornley bit his lip. "It's obvious. Jupiter has caught people before. Ships unable to fight free of gravity. They've sent distress signals that were picked up. No rescue ship could get to them in time. And we don't even have sending equipment."

"Aha!" Skutch's teeth clicked triumphantly. "We come to the core of mankind's woes. Man looks back on past occurrences, and plans the future accordingly. The future therefore is thought of as a carbon copy of the past. This is definitely not so, young man. Your no doubt excellent brain is using identity thought. What a dangerous thing! Understand this: *no one* event is identical with another. What is happening to us now has no relationship whatever with anything that ever happened to anybody else. This

is a new situation. We can make of it what we will without letting past events dictate to us. Do you understand?"

"It makes sense," Dornley said wearily. "But it still scared the living daylights out of me."

"My dear Lieutenant Dornley." Skutch snapped with asperity, "that is because you are, if I may say it, not alive. You are not *being*. Look around you!" He made a great, enthusiastic, sweeping arc with his free arm. "Would you be dead like most of mankind? Here you have beauty! Here you have majesty! Here you have depth and mystery and awesome ideas to contend with! There is joy out here, not terror. Young man, I command you *to be!*"

If there had been anything to sit on, Dornley would have sat up at the sternness in Skutch's voice. At any rate, he felt some kind of bells ringing in his head, and he did look around. It was beautiful, he decided forlornly—if you didn't worry.

Skutch was looking through Dornley's visor at him. He grinned widely. "That's better. Young man, I have a suggestion. Go to sleep. I shall be sure to adjust our falling speed so that we shall not strike the atmosphere fast enough to create heat."

Dornley did go to sleep, as if Skutch had used positive suggestion. He slept long, solidly, and potently. When he awoke, it was because he and Skutch were pinwheeling through a thickening atmosphere. Skutch muttered something about not knowing where the stabilizer controls were. Dornley found them for him; soon, the tiny gyroscopes whirring, they were falling feet first.

There was little light. Starlight could not penetrate this incredibly thick skin of gases that covered Jupiter. A red glow, originating from the reflection of the Great Red Spot halfway around the planet, afforded hardly any illumination. Dornley turned on the search-beam unit in the breast of his suit to read his meters. Twelve hundred miles to go to get to the surface. He spoke to Skutch. Skutch muttered groggily. Dornley said nothing more, and let Skutch fall asleep.

The vigil could have been full of terror, but Dornley reflected that some of Skutch's strange philosophy had gotten through to him, and no doubt would keep him pepped up for awhile. He frowned. A strange experience, a strange man, who was working on an ultimate weapon, and *did* have conspirators working with him, by his own admission.

Something didn't jibe. What? No answer.

They fell. Dornley thought, so this was a new situation? Hmm. But it was the same deadly planet. But maybe not. Old Man Jupiter was a guy with many faces, many mysteries, ninety-nine per cent unknown.

Two and a half times Earth gravity; fifteen thousand times Earth's atmospheric pressure!

Dornley grimaced down through heaving blackness. "Jupiter, old man," he prayed as an experiment, "let us down easy. And if we get away free, and I get Skutch where he belongs, I promise . . ." Could go to church every Sunday; but Jupiter doesn't care.

Five hundred miles. Dornley didn't dare take his eyes away from the set of meters. One hundred miles. He kept

his eyes glued to them. Ten miles. He tried to wake up Skutch. Two miles. Skutch would not waken. One thousand feet.

"Skutch!" screamed Dornley. Three hundred feet. But fractional readings didn't work. Twenty-five feet below his search-beam glanced off a liquid, gleaming surface. Dornley, robbed of the time to do things properly, wasn't able to throw Skutch's gravity reactor over; he could only shove over his own. Result, not enough gravity decrease. They hit hard and went under.

Under.

Thank you, Old Man Jupiter.

Skutch was muttering as they floated up. Floated up was not the best description of the process. They were being carried up. Nor did they break surface. The surface was under them.

In any event, the movement ceased. Dornley's chest-beam was still on. It illuminated what at first glance seemed to be a smooth circular cavern exuding a greenish, a gorgeous radiance. The radiance was, of course, the dispersed radiance of the beam.

Skutch muttered again. Dornley tried to move. He was flat on his back, locked tight against Skutch. Like a vice. His helmet was held down; he could barely move his head inside it. One arm was lying free against his chest; he carefully kept it that way. His legs were clamped together and in turn locked to Skutch's. His other arm was squeezed in tight to Skutch's. Strange.

Silence. Skutch spoke. "Well, young man? You are thinking?"

Dornley was thinking—rather detachedly. He was thinking of two men alone on an uninhabited planet—uninhabited except for an inaccessible

domed city halfway around the planet. Two men thinking of impossibilities, in terms of hope and escape and rescue.

So he should think. What he should do was reach over with his free arm and tune the great Dr. Waldo Skutch's oxygen intake to zero.

Skutch's sigh came. "I am disappointed in you, Lieutenant. An unchained mind already would have diagnosed the situation and be devising solutions. The free man manipulates the world; the world manipulates the slave. Are you slave to your own pessimism? That is the important problem, not whether you will continue to live.

"However, I shall start your enslaved mind to working. The 'cave,' as you have already misnomered it, is not a cave. Listen to the Jupiter wind." A wind did sound, outside somewhere, a whining, gusty thunder that rose, fell, augmented, diminished. The gorgeously green 'cave' expanded and contracted correspondingly, sometimes as much as two or three feet.

"You see?" Skutch chuckled. "Jupiter is breathing. We have fallen into his mouth and are enveloped in a bubble of spit! One's imagination could make much of this. But let us stick to fact, fact at least as the mind of man knows it.

"Fifteen thousand atmospheres press on a lake of strange liquid metal. A unique distortion occurs on the surface of the lake. One could say that a surface tension thousands of times one would think possible is almost certain to be created. Now you are thinking?" Skutch's voice was hopeful; he was like a man who has primed a pump and is sure water must come out.

"Hell," muttered Dornley rebelliously. He was thinking of two needles locked together on a surface film of water. So how does one free the two needles so they can eddy around for awhile with a certain amount of freedom? Stir up the water around them, maybe. Not that exactly . . .

"Don't worry, I'm not exactly dead," he told Skutch. "I've got a free arm. I've also got an idea."

He could reach Skutch's gravity unit rheostat with some effort; his own was easy. He turned both rheostats on full; instantly, their weights increased and they sagged below the surface of the liquid stuff, lying in a sort of deep hollow.

"Get set," he told Skutch. He turned both rheostats suddenly back to the zero mark, which equalled one half a gravity. Donley's breath whooshed out as the sag in the surface of the lake bounced back in place, snapping the two men a half-dozen feet into the air.

There was a breaking sound. When Donley came to, he was sitting cross-legged a half dozen feet from Skutch. Skutch had fallen on his back, helpless again, arms and legs forced together. But he was chuckling delightedly, and told Dornley that when he came this way, he could pull Skutch to a sitting position too.

Dornley was about to remonstrate that he intended to stay where he was when he noticed that inevitably the strengthened surface between them was drawing them together. Well, anyway, the handcuffs, brittle in the sub-zero cold, had snapped, and Dornley was arm-free, so there was that much gained.

A moment later, the two men were sitting knee to knee.

Dornley now looked around with greater interest.

"It's a bubble, all right," he admitted. "Big babies. There's a gas seepage in the bed of the lake, I'd say. The wind causes change in pressure outside. That's a good aerodynamic principle that works on any planet. The bubble gets bigger or smaller accordingly."

One section of the bubble became a flat wall.

"Interesting," commented Dornley, so fascinated he didn't know his worry about the future had momentarily slipped away. "Another bigger bubble bumped into it."

Skutch surveyed him with an extremely friendly smile, but he said nothing, being speechless for the first time.

Dornley tentatively tugged his Biow thermo-gun from its holster, and after some hesitation took a pot-shot at the two bubbles' connecting skin. It turned a brighter green in one spot, but didn't break, so Dornley turned the temperature up a little. This time there was a crack of thunder, and things happened. Dornley and Skutch were tossed around, and when things quieted down, they were again being forced together and a bubble four times as big arched over them. The two bubbles apparently had merged.

Dornley grinned, and Skutch grinned back.

"You see?" Skutch spread his hands as if life itself had been explained. "One plays with toys, but one does not allow toys to play with him—unless he wants them to. In this way, free men master all that is within and without them. Now, my dear Lieutenant, I am sure you have determined

our next step, the means of securing escape from this lake? His shaggy brows went up.

Dornley surveyed him thoughtfully. He was beginning to get certain ideas, very strong and intuitive ideas.

"I have not determined it," he stated.

The shaggy face behind the visor smiled broadly. Skutch reached out a hand. "Let me have your gun, young man," he commanded.

Instead of doing that, Dornley brought the gun up and centered it on the chest of Skutch's pressure suit.

He said conversationally, "Dr. Skutch, if I were to turn the heat intensity on this thermal weapon up to full blast, it would take me five minutes to burn a hole in your suit and let fifteen thousand atmospheric pressures in."

Skutch's face was wrenched with a bitter surprise. He snarled. "Why?"

"I've been a good boy, Dr. Skutch. I didn't lose my temper when you began . . . uh . . . manipulating me. I treated you like a prisoner of war, with courtesy, with great courtesy. Believe me, I shall continue to be courteous. But I am still a member of the Service, and I have my duty. We are *not* friends."

Skutch relaxed visibly, his tiger-look vanishing. "Oh, that." He shrugged contemptuously. "Duty. Courtesy. Catchwords. Other men's thoughts again. They mean nothing."

"That's not all," said Dornley determinedly. "I have certain beliefs regarding you. One is that you are conspiring to overthrow not only the Earth government, but the governments, eventually of the other planets as well. The enemy planets."

"Enemy!" Skutch raised his hands to invisible gods. "There he goes again! Whose enemy? Not his enemy. The enemy of the higher-ups who think for him. You have learned nothing from me, young man, *nothing*?"

Dornley felt his thinking apparatus going haywire.

"Furthermore," he went on distractedly, "you *do* have a base, a headquarters, and you have many men under you. This has been suspected too. But not until now has anyone been convinced of its location. That base, I am convinced, is on this planet. And not too far from here! Else, *why* are you so optimistic?"

"Again, by your own admission to me, you, a genius in the field of science, are working with your men on a weapon so powerful that it could not be withstood by any power. Of this I believe you are capable.

"Dr. Skutch, I can be optimistic too, under certain conditions, but I *know* we can't reach Jupiter City. And I cannot allow you the possibility of escape to your headquarters, even if I die.

"I am sure I should kill you now."

Skutch grunted: "Why don't you?"

Dornley sweated. Skutch grunted again, almost disinterestedly. "You don't believe half of what you're saying. Lieutenant. That's why. You're waiting for proof from me. I'll give you proof. My base *is* near here—only three thousand miles. You do think. And I do have many men—and women—and children—under me. And I am creating a super-weapon that is intended to destroy! Tell me, Lieutenant, how would you like to see that super-weapon in operation?"

Dornley clamped his teeth together. "I would, but—"

"Excellent!" Some of Skutch's ebullience came back. Then his stare became bright and penetrating.

"Lieutenant, what possessions do you have?"

The direction of the conversation was going out of control. Dornley felt loggy. "None," he said wearily. "I'm in the Service. A few papers, old letters, some civilian clothes, a number of books. That's all. Why?"

"You're not married? You have no children? You have no relatives you are tied to?" At Dornley's lack of replies in the affirmative, he cried, "Excellent, excellent, excellent! Lieutenant, how would you like to take a trip to my base, my so-called militant headquarters, and watch the rays of my deadly weapon at work?"

Dornley felt himself crumbling. He suspected some kind of equivocation here that would put him in a still worse position. But worse from whose viewpoint? He was tired of thinking. Well, answer the question. From the viewpoint of duty, from the viewpoint of oaths, from the viewpoint of the men who bossed the men who bossed the men who bossed the men, who in turn got their ideas and their convictions from official papers written by the last generation, or men ten generations dead, who had written books and conceived traditions and rules . . . A tanglework of convention and protocol and axiomatic falsehoods that had a bad beginning. War, poverty, pain, violence, science, more science, better science, super-science, war, poverty . . . Super-dooper science . . .

Pensively he looked beyond Skutch. Life was wrong. Yes, drastically wrong

somehow. He was in a position where he should kill Skutch—but he couldn't. What then? He had to go with Skutch. That too was being forced on him. Go with Skutch! Find out, at least, what he was up to. Get a look at this so-called super-weapon, at his base, at the people he worked with. And then—

He shook his head regretfully. "I can't kill you, doctor. I'll go with you, if we can make it. If I don't like what I see, I promise I'll leave and won't say anything. That goes against my oath, but that's the way I'll stand."

"But if you do like it?" The question was proving.

"You'd want me to stay? Give up Earth?"

"Bah!" Skutch rocked back. "You never had Earth. Earth had you. No, no, young man. You'd go back. Some day we'll all go back—if we want to. But not for long."

Dornley gave him a fleeting, worn smile, said nothing. Skutch's breath came out in a long, sustained sigh.

Dornley looked at his gun. "As for getting to 'dry' land," he mused, "That should be easy. A spot heat should reduce the tension and give us a pull in the opposite direction."

He destroyed the gently vibrating bubble with a single blast. It disappeared in thunder, though for a second great drops of it rained down. Dornley waited until he and Skutch once more swung together, waited until he had accustomed himself to winds that had the push of undersea currents. He then adjusted the gun to maximum aperture. This gave him a fanning beam, which he played on the surface film to his left, adequately lessening its tension.

The surface forces to Dornley's right being greater, they contracted continuously, pulling him and Skutch smoothly away from the heated surface. Dornley, wanting to be sure they did not move in a circle, turned up the stabilizers.

After an hour, what would roughly be described as a "beach" appeared. strong cohesive forces, however, caused the lake edge to sweep upward in a sharp curve, a dozen feet high. Dornley surveyed that obstacle distrustfully, but apparently the strength of the contracting film was enough to overcome gravitational pull. They swooped up, poised. Skutch clawed at the rocky ledge of the beach and got free. Dornley was poised on the lip. Skutch got him under the arm-pits and heaved him out.

Dornley looked questioningly at Skutch as they stood free with ammonia-methane winds moving sluggishly around them. Skutch motioned him to sit down.

"They'll come for us," he said complacently.

"They know we're here?" Dornley was incredulous.

Skutch grinned hugely. "Why not? Science is not an end, but it is a tool." He picked up two slate-colored rocks, knocked them together. "Sounds travel, and do not stop. Instruments pick up vibrations. They'll be here. We do have ways to move about the planet."

There was silence. Then Dornley saw that Skutch was looking at him, intently, purposefully.

"You will live with us," Skutch said slowly. "You will learn. There will be girls there. There will be girls who will fall in love with you—if they want to.

You will lack for nothing. But you must learn.

"When I say Jupiter is alive, you will say maybe it is alive, and try to find out why I think it is alive. When I say apple trees will thrive in a glass of water, you will question the concept. You will reexamine every tradition, every convention, every idea that has been thrust at you and which you have been forced to accept. You will ask why you *must* do such and such. Who said so? You will begin throwing out hundreds of false ideas, but *you* will use *them*, they will not use you. You will examine your fears, your guilts, your jealousies, your envies. Eventually, you will compel them, they will not compel you. Nothing, no one, no idea, will ever use you again.

Unless, of course, you want it to."

He rocked back on his haunches, hands on his spread knees, grinning his tiger's grin.

"The prospect frightens you? Do not let it, young man. Already I have used my secret weapon on you. Its rays are deeply imbedded in your body. Already you see how easily one's own personal bubbles can burst. You will never be the same.

"But not for a thousand years will we, or those who come after us, be ready for humanity itself."

The winds moved sluggishly. Time passed. Dornley sat stricken, wondering what he could discard, wondering what he could keep.

The End





Illustrator: David Stone

Someone once said that Theodore Sturgeon has only one real story to tell, but that he tells it so well editors will go on buying it forever. Don't you believe it! The basis for such a remark comes from the author's variations on a single theme: Somewhere in the universe are alien beings that can help man to gain his rightful heritage.

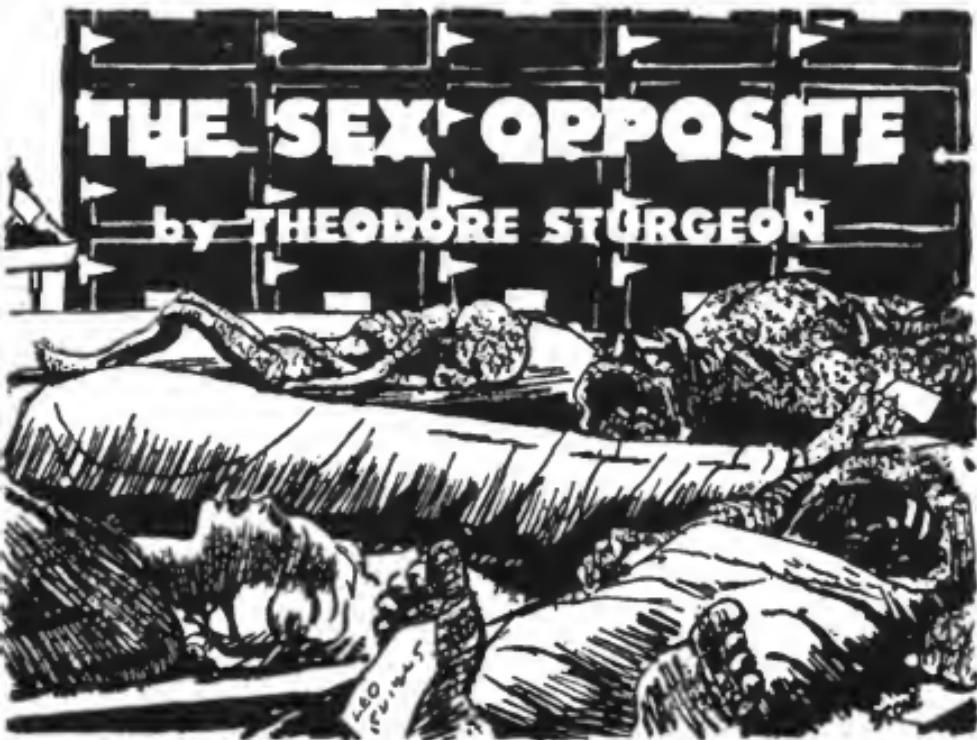
If all this sounds too esoteric, don't let us mislead you. The *Sex Opposite* opens with the murder of two lovers in a night-shrouded park and ends with a triple slaying on a street corner. And out of it comes the tender story of a young couple who might never have found love had not death pointed out the way. . . .

BUDGIE slid into the laboratory without knocking, as usual. She was flushed and breathless, her eyes bright with speed and eagerness. "Whatcha got, Muley?"

Muhlenberg kicked the morgue door shut before Budgie could get in line with it. "Nothing," he said flatly, "and of all the people I don't want to see — and at the

THE SEX-OPPOSITE

by THEODORE STURGEON



moment that means all the people there are — you head the list. Go away."

Budgie pulled off her gloves and stuffed them into an oversized shoulder-bag, which she hurled across the laboratory onto a work-surface. "Come on, Muley. I saw the meat-wagon outside. I know what it brought, too. That double murder in the park. Al told me."

"Al's jaw is one that needs more tying up than any of the stiffness he taxis around," said Muhlenberg bitterly. "Well, you're not getting near this pair."

She came over to him, stood very close. In spite of his annoyance, he couldn't help noticing how soft and full her lips were just then. *Just then* — and the sudden realization added to the annoyance. He had known for a long time that Budgie could turn on mechanisms that made every one of a man's ductless glands purse up its lips and blow like a trumpet. Every time he felt it he hated himself. "Get away from me," he growled. "It won't work."

"What won't, Muley?" she murmured.

Muhlenberg looked her straight in the eye and said something about his preference for raw liver over Budgie-times-twelve.

The softness went out of her lips, to be replaced by no particular hardness. She simply laughed good-naturedly. "All right, you're immune. I'll try logic."

"Nothing will work," he said. "You will not get in there to see those two, and you'll get no details from me for any of that *couché-con-carne* stew you call a newspaper story."

"Okay," she said surprisingly. She crossed the lab and picked up her handbag. She found a glove and began to pull it on. "Sorry I interrupted you, Muley. I do get the idea. You want to be alone."

His jaw was too slack to enunciate an answer. He watched her go out, watched the door close, watched it open again, heard her say in a very hurt tone, "But I do think you could tell me *why* you won't say anything about this murder."

He scratched his head. "As long as you behave yourself, I guess I do owe you that." He thought for a moment. "It's not your kind of a story. That's about the best way to put it."

"Not my kind of a story? A double murder in Lover's Lane? The maudlin mystery of the mugger, or mayhem in Maytime? No kidding, Muley — you're not serious!"

"Budgie, this one isn't for fun. It's ugly. Very *damn* ugly. And it's serious. It's mysterious for a number of other reasons than the ones you want to siphon into your readers."

"What other reasons?"

"Medically. Biologically. Socio-logically."

"My stories got biology. Sociology they got likewise; stodgy truisms about social trends is the way I dish up sex in the public prints, or didn't you know? So—that leaves medical. What's so strange medically about this case?"

"Good night, Budgie."

"Come on, Muley. You can't horrify *me*."

"That I know. You've trod more primrose pathology in your research than Krafft-Ebing plus eleven comic books. No, Budgie. No more."

"Dr. F. L. Muhlenberg, brilliant young biologist and special medical consultant to the City and State Police, intimated that these aspects of the case—the brutal murder and disfigurement of the embarrassed couple—were superficial compared with the unspeakable facts behind them. 'Medically mysterious', he was quoted as saying." She twinkled at him. "How's that sound?" She looked at her watch. "And I can make the early edition, too, with a head. Something like **DOC SHOCKED SPEECHLESS**—and a subhead: **Lab Sleuth Suppresses Medical Details of Double Park Killing**. Yeah, and your picture."

"If you dare to print anything of the sort," he raged, "I'll—"

"All right, all right," she said conciliatingly. "I won't. I really won't."

"Promise me?"

"I promise, Muley . . . if—"

"Why should I bargain?" he demanded suddenly. "Get out of here."

She began to close the door. "And something for the editorial page," she said. "Is a doctor within his rights in suppressing information concerning a murderous maniac and his methods?" She closed the door.

Muhlenberg bit his lower lip so hard he all but yelped. He ran to the door and snatched it open. "Wait!"

Budgie was leaning against the doorpost lighting a cigarette. "I was waiting," she said reasonably.

"Come in here," he grated. He snatched her arm and whirled her inside, slamming the door.

"You're a brute," she said, rubbing her arm and smiling dazzlingly.

"The only way to muzzle you is to tell you the whole story. Right?"

"Right. If I get an exclusive when you're ready to break the story."

"There's probably a kicker in that, too," he said morosely. He glared at her. Then, "Sit down," he said.

She did. "I'm all yours."

"Don't change the subject," he said with a ghost of his natural humor. He lit a thoughtful cigarette. "What do you know about this case so far?"

"Too little," she said. "This couple were having a conversation without words in the park when some muggers jumped them and killed them, a little more gruesomely than usual. But instead of being delivered to the city morgue, they were brought straight to you on the orders of the ambulance interne after one quick look."

"How did you know about it?"

"Well, if you must know, I was in the park. There's a short-cut over by the museum, and I was about a hundred yards down the path when I . . ."

Muhlenberg waited as long as tact demanded, and a little longer. Her face was still, her gaze detached. "Go on."

". . . when I heard a scream," she said in the precise tone of voice which she had been using. Then she began to cry.

"Hey," he said. He knelt beside her, put a hand on her shoulder. She shoved it away angrily, and covered her face with the damp towel. When she took it down again she seemed to be laughing. She was doing it so badly that he turned away in very real embarrassment.

"Sorry," she said in a very shaken whisper. "It . . . was that kind of a scream. I've never heard anything like it. It did something to me. It had more agony in it than a single sound should be able to have." She closed her eyes.

"Man or woman?"

She shook her head.

"So," he said matter-of-factly, "what did you do then?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all, for I don't know how long." She slammed a small fist down on the table. "I'm supposed to be a reporter!" she flared. "And there I stand like a dummy, like a wharf-rat in concussion-shock!" She wet her lips. "When I came around I was standing by a rock wall with one hand on it." She showed him. 'Broke two perfectly good fingernails, I was holding on so tight. I ran toward where I'd heard the sound. Just trampled brush, nothing else. I heard a crowd milling around on the avenue. I went up there. The meat-wagon was there, Al and that young sawbones Regal — Ruggles —"

"Regalio."

"Yeah, him. They'd just put those two bodies into the ambulance. They were covered with blankets. I asked what was up. Regalio waved a finger and said

Not for school-girls' and gave me a real death-mask grin. He climbed aboard. I grabbed Al and asked him what was what. He said muggers had killed this couple, and it was pretty rugged. Said Regalio had told him to bring them here, even before he made a police report. They were both about as upset as they could get."

"I don't wonder," said Muhlenberg.

"Then I asked if I could ride and they said no and took off. I grabbed a cab when I found one to grab, which was all of fifteen minutes later, and here I am. Here I am," she repeated, "getting a story out of you in the damndest way yet. You're asking, I'm answering." She got up. "You write the feature, Muley. I'll go on into your icebox and do your work."

He caught her arm. "Nah! No you don't! Like the man said—it's not for school-girls."

"Anything you have in there *can't* be worse than my imagination!" she snapped.

"Sorry. It's what you get for barging in on me before I've had a chance to think something through. You see, this wasn't exactly two people."

"I know!" she said sarcastically. "Siamese twins."

He looked at her distantly. "Yes. 'Tain't funny, kiddo."

For once she had nothing to say. She put one hand slowly up to her mouth and apparently forgot it, for there it stayed.

"That's what's so ugly about this. Those two were . . . torn apart." He closed his eyes. "I can just see it. I wish I couldn't. Those thugs drifting through the park at night, out for anything they could get. They hear something . . . fall right over them . . . I don't know. Then—"

"All right, all right," she whis-

pered hoarsely. "I can hear you."

"But, damn it," he said angrily, "I've been kicking around this field long enough to know every documented case of such a creature. And I just can't believe that one like this could exist without having been written up in some medical journal somewhere. Even if they were born in Soviet Russia, some translation of a report would've appeared somewhere."

"I know Siamese twins are rare. But surely such a birth wouldn't make international headlines!"

"This one would," he said positively. "For one thing, Siamese twins usually bear more anomalies than just the fact that they are attached. They're frequently fraternal rather than identical twins. More often than not one's born more fully developed than the other. Usually when they're born at all they don't live. But these"—

"What's so special?"

Muhlenberg spread his hands. "They're perfect. They're costally joined by a surprisingly small tissue-organ complex—"

"Wait, professor. 'Costally'—you mean at the chest?"

"That's right. And the link is — was — not major. I can't understand why they were never surgically separated. There may be a reason, of course, but that'll have to wait on the autopsy."

"Why wait?"

"It's all I can do to wait." He grinned suddenly. "You see,

you're more of a help than you realize, Budge. I'm dying to get to work on them, but under the circumstances I have to wait until morning. Regalio reported to the police, and I know the coroner isn't going to come around this time of night, not if I could show him quintuplets in a chain like sausages. In addition I don't have identities, I don't have relatives' releases — you know. So — a superficial examination, a lot of wild guesses, and a chance to sound off to you to keep myself from going nuts."

"You're *using* me!"

"That's bad?"

"Yes — when I don't get any fun out of it."

He laughed. "I love those incendiary statements of yours. I'm just not flammable."

She looked at him, up and a little sidewise. "Not at all?"

"Not to you."

She considered that. She looked down at her hands, as if they were the problem of Muhlenberg's susceptibility. She turned the hands over, then nodded. "I think I know why."

"Do tell."

She said, "We have nothing in common. I mean, but *nothing*. We're different to the core, to the bone. You hunt out facts and so do I, but we could never share that because we don't use facts for the same things. You use facts only to find more facts."

"What do you use them for?" She smiled. "All sorts of things. A good reporter doesn't report just what happens. He reports what he *sees* — in many cases a very different thing. Anyways . . ."

"Wonder how these biological pressures affected our friends here," he mused, thumbing over his shoulder at the morgue.

"About the same, I'd judge, with certain important difficulties. But wait — were they men or women, or one of each?"

"I didn't tell you, did I?" he said, with real startlement.

"No," she said.

He opened his mouth to answer, but could not. The scream came.

It came from downstairs, or outside, or perhaps from nowhere or everywhere, or from a place without a name. It was all around them, inside, behind them in time as well as space. It was the echo of their own first cry when they lost the first warmth and found loneliness, early, as everyone must. It was hurt: some the pain of impact, some of fever and delirium, and some the great pressure of beauty too beautiful to bear. And like pain, it could not be remembered. It lasted as long as it was a sound, and perhaps a little longer, and the frozen time after it died was immeasurable.

Muhlenberg became increas-

ingly conscious of an ache in his calves and in the trapezoid muscles of his back. They sent him a gradual and completely intellectualized message of strain, and very consciously he relieved it and sat down. His movement carried Budgie's arm forward, and he looked down at her hand, which was clamped around his forearm. She moved it away, opening it slowly, and he saw the angry marks of her fingers, and knew they would be bruises in the morning.

She said, "That was the scream. The one I heard. Wasn't once enough?"

It was only then that he could look far enough out of himself to see her face. It was pasty with shock, and wet, and her lips were pale. He leapt to his feet. "Another one! *Come on!*"

He pulled her up and through the door. "Don't you understand?" he blazed. "Another one! It can't be, but somewhere out there it's happened again —"

She pulled back. "Are you sure it wasn't . . ." She nodded at the closed door of the morgue.

"Don't be ridiculous," he snorted. "*They* couldn't be alive." He hurried her to the stairs.

It was very dark. Muhlenberg's office was in an ageing business building which boasted twenty-five-watt bulbs on every other floor. They hurtled through the murk, past the deep-set doorways

of the law firm, the doll factory, the import-export firm which imported and exported nothing but phone calls, and all the other dim mosaics of enterprise. The building seemed quite deserted, and but for the yellow-orange glow of the landings and the pathetic little bulbs, there were no lights anywhere. And it was as quiet as it was almost dark; quiet as late night; quiet as death.

They burst out onto the old brownstone steps and stopped, afraid to look, wanting to look. There was nothing. Nothing but the street, a lonesome light, a distant horn and, far up at the corner, the distinct clicking of the relays in a traffic-light standard as they changed an ignored string of emeralds to an unnoticed ruby rope.

"Go up to the corner," he said, pointing. "I'll go down the other way. That noise wasn't far away —"

"No," she said. "I'm coming with you."

"Good," he said, so glad he was amazed at himself. They ran north to the corner. There was no one on the street within two blocks in any direction. There were cars, mostly parked, one coming, but none leaving.

"Now what?" she asked.

For a moment he did not answer. She waited patiently while he listened to the small distant

noises which made the night so quiet. Then, "Good night, Budge."

"Good — what!"

He waved a hand. "You can go home now."

"But what about the —"

"I'm tired," he said. "I'm bewildered. That scream wrung me like a floor-mop and pulled me down too many stairs too fast. There's too much I don't know about this and not enough I can do about it. So go home."

"Aw, Muley . . ."

He sighed. "I know. Your story. Budgie, I faithfully promise you I'll give you an exclusive as soon as I have facts I can trust."

She looked carefully at his face in the dim light and nodded at what she saw there. "All right, Muley. The pressure's off. Call me?"

"I'll call you."

He stood watching her walk away. Quite a gal, he thought. They don't come more dynamic. Quite normally gynoid, to boot, if you liked her type. Pity she didn't make him go boing-g-g. He tried to imagine sharing anything deep with her and gave it up. He shrugged and ambled back toward the laboratory, pondering morphology, teratology, and a case where *monstra per defectum* could coexist with *monstra per fabricam alienam*.

Then he saw the light.

It flickered out over the street,

soft and warm. He stopped and looked up. The light showed in a third-story window. It was orange and yellow, but with it was a flaring blue-white. It was pretty. It was also in his laboratory. No — not the laboratory. The morgue.

Muhlenberg groaned. After that he saved his breath. He needed it badly by the time he got back to the laboratory.

Muhlenberg dove for the heavy morgue door and snatched it open. A great pressure of heat punted a gout of smoke into the lab. He slammed the door, ran to a closet, snatched out a full-length lab smock, spun the faucets in the sink and soaked the smock. From another cabinet he snatched up two glass-globe fire extinguishers. He wrapped the wet cloth twice around his face and let the rest drop over his chest and back. Cradling the extinguishers in one bent forearm, he reached for the side of the door and grabbed the pump-type extinguisher racked there.

Now, suddenly not hurrying, he stepped up on the sill and stood on tiptoe, peering through a fold of the wet cloth. Then he crouched low and peered again. Satisfied, he stood up and carefully pegged the two glass extinguishers, one straight ahead, one to the right and down. Then he disappeared into the smoke, holding the third extinguisher at the ready.

There was a rising moan, and

the smoke shook like a solid entity and rushed into the room and away. As it cleared, Muhlenberg, head and shoulders wrapped in sooty linen, found himself leaning against the wall, gasping, with one hand on a knife-switch on the wall. A three-foot exhaust fan in the top sash of one window was making quick work of the smoke.

Racks of chemicals, sterilizers, and glass cabinets full of glittering surgeon's tools lined the left wall. Out on the floor were four massive tables, on each of which was a heavy marble top. The rest of the room was taken up by a chemist's bench, sinks, a partitioned-off darkroom with lightproof curtains, and a massive centrifuge.

On one of the tables was a mass of what looked like burned meat and melted animal fat. It smelled bad—not rotten bad, but acrid and—and *wet*, if a smell can be described that way. Through it was the sharp, stinging odor of corrosive chemicals.

He unwound the ruined smock from his face and threw it into a corner. He walked to the table with the mess on it and stood looking bleakly at it for a time. Suddenly he put out a hand, and with thumb and forefinger pulled out a length of bone.

"What a job," he breathed at length.

He walked around the table, poked at something slumped there and snatched his hand away. He

went to the bench and got a pair of forceps, which he used to pick up the lump. It looked like a piece of lava or slag. He turned on a hooded lamp and studied it closely.

"Thermite, by God," he breathed.

He stood quite still for a moment, clenching and unclenching his square jaw. He took a long slow turn around the seared horror on the morgue slab, then carefully picked up the forceps and hurled them furiously into a corner. Then he went out to the lab and picked up the phone. He dialled.

"Emergency," he said. "Hello, Sue. Regalio there? Muhlenberg. Thanks. . . . Hello, Doc. Are you sitting down? All right. Now get this. I'm fresh out of symmetrical teratomorphs. They're gone. . . . Shut up and I'll tell you! I was out in the lab talking to a reporter when I heard the damndest scream. We ran out and found nothing. I left the reporter outside and came back: I couldn't've been out more'n ten-twelve minutes. But somebody got in here, moved both stiffs onto one slab, incised them from the thorax to the pubis, crammed them full of iron oxide and granulated aluminum—I have lots of that sort of stuff around here—fused 'em with a couple rolls of magnesium foil and touched 'em off. Made a great big messy thermite bomb out of them.

... No, dammit, of *course* there's nothing left of them! What would you think eight minutes at seven thousand degrees would do? ... Oh, dry up, Regalio! I don't know who did it or why, and I'm too tired to think about it. I'll see you tomorrow morning. No — what would be the use of sending anyone down here? This wasn't done to fire the building; whoever did it just wanted to get rid of these bodies, and sure did a job. ... The coroner? I don't know what I'll tell him. I'm going to get a drink and then I'm going to bed. I just wanted you to know. Don't tell the press. I'll head off that reporter who was here before. We can do without this kind of story. 'Mystery arsonist cremates evidence of double killing in lab of medical consultant.' A block from headquarters, yet. ... Yeah, and get your driver to keep his trap shut, too. Okay, Regalio. Just wanted to let you know. ... Well, you're no sorrier'n I am. We'll just have to wait another couple hundred years while something like that gets born again, I guess."

Muhlenberg hung up, sighed, went into the morgue. He turned off the fan and lights, locked the morgue door, washed up at the laboratory sink, and shut the place up for the night.

It was eleven blocks to his apartment — an awkward distance

most of the time, for Muhlenberg was not of the fresh-air and deep-breathing fraternity. Eleven blocks was not far enough to justify a cab and not near enough to make walking a negligible detail. At the seventh block he was aware of an overwhelming thirst and a general sensation that somebody had pulled the plug out of his energy barrel. He was drawn as if by a vacuum into Rudy's, a Mexican bar with Yma Sumac and Villa-Lobos on the juke-box.

"*Olé, amigo,*" said Rudy. "Tonight you don't smile."

Muhlenberg crawled wearily onto a stool: "*Deme una tequila sour, and skip the cherry,*" he said in his bastard Spanish. "I don't know what I got to smile about." He froze, and his eyes bulged. "Come back here, Rudy."

Rudy put down the lemon he was slicing and came close. "I don't want to point, but who is that?"

Rudy glanced at the girl. "A.y," he said rapturously. "*Que chuchin.*"

Muhlenberg remembered vaguely that *chuchin* was untranslatable, but that the closest English could manage with it was "cute". He shook his head. "That won't do." He held up his hand. Don't try to find me a Spanish word for it. There isn't any word for it. Who is she?"

Rudy spread his hands. "No sé."

"She by herself?"



"Si."

Muhlenberg put his chin on his hand. "Make my drink. I want to think."

Rudy went, his mahogany cheeks drawn in and still in his version of a smile.

Muhlenberg looked at the girl in the booth again just as her gaze swept past his face to the bartender. "Rudy!" she called softly, "are you making a tequila sour?"

"Si, senorita."

"Make me one too?"

Rudy beamed. He did not turn his head toward Muhlenberg, but his dark eyes slid over toward him, and Muhlenberg knew that he was intensely amused. Muhlenberg's face grew hot, and he felt like an idiot. He had a wild fantasy that his ears had turned forward and snapped shut, and that the cello-and-velvet sound of her voice, captured, was nestling down inside his head like a warm little animal.

He got off the bar stool, fumbled in his pocket for change and went to the juke-box. She was

there before him, slipping a coin in, selecting a strange and wonderful recording called *Vene A Mi Casa*, which was a *borracho* version of "C'mon-a My House".

"I was just going to play that!" he said. He glanced at the juke box. "Do you like Yma Sumac?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Do you like *lots* of Yma Sumac?" She smiled and, seeing it, he bit his tongue. He dropped in a quarter and punched out six sides of Sumac. When he looked up Rudy was standing by the booth with a little tray on which were two tequila sours. His face was utterly impassive and his head was tilted at the precise angle of inquiry as to where he should put Muhlenberg's drink. Muhlenberg met the girl's eyes, and whether she nodded ever so slightly or whether she did it with a single movement of her eyelids, he did not know, but it meant "yes". He slid into the booth opposite her.

Music came. Only some of it was from the records. He sat and

listened to it all. Rudy came with a second drink before he said anything, and only then did he realize how much time had passed while he rested there, taking in her face as if it were quite a new painting by a favorite artist. She did nothing to draw his attention or to reject it. She did not stare rapturously into his eyes or avoid them. She did not even appear to be waiting, or expecting anything of him. She was neither remote nor intimate. She was close, and it was good.

He thought, in your most secret dreams you cut a niche in yourself, and it is finished early, and then you wait for someone to come along to fill it — but to fill it exactly, every cut, curve, hollow and plane of it. And people do come along, and one covers up the niche, and another rattles around inside it, and another is so surrounded by fog that for the longest time you don't know if she fits or not; but each of them hits you with a tremendous impact. And then one comes along and slips in so quietly that you don't know when it happened, and fits so well you almost can't feel anything at all. And that is it.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked him.

He told her, immediately and fully. She nodded as if he had been talking about cats or cathedrals or cam-shafts, or anything

else beautiful and complex. She said "That's right. It isn't all there is, of course. It isn't even enough. But everything else isn't enough without it."

"What is 'everything else'?"

"You know," she said.

He thought he did. He wasn't sure. He put it aside for later. "Will you come home with me?"

"Oh, yes."

They got up. She stood by the door, her eyes full of him, while he went to the bar with his wallet. "¿Cuánto le debo?"

Rudy's eyes had a depth he had never noticed before. Perhaps it hadn't been there before. "Nada," said Rudy.

"On the house? *Muchissimo gracias, amigo.*" He knew, profoundly, that he shouldn't protest.

They went to his apartment. While he was pouring brandy — brandy because, if it's good brandy, it marries well with tequila — she asked him if he knew of a place called Shake's, down in the warehouse district. He thought he did; he knew he could find it. "I want to meet you there tomorrow night at eight," she said. "I'll be there," he smiled. He turned to put the brandy carafe back, full of wordless pleasure in the knowledge that all day tomorrow he could look forward to being with her again.

He played records. He was part sheer technician, part delighted

child when he could demonstrate his sound system. He had a copy of the Confucian "Analects" in a sandalwood box. It was printed on rice-paper and hand-illuminated. He had a Finnish dagger with intricate scrollwork which, piece by piece and as a whole, made many pictures. He had a clock made of four glass discs, the inner two each carrying one hand, and each being rim-driven from the base so it seemed to have no works at all.

She loved all these things. She sat in his biggest chair while he stared out at the blue dark hours and she read aloud to him from "The Crock of Gold" and from Thurber and Shakespeare for laughter, and from Shakespeare and William Morris for a good sadness.

She sang, once.

Finally she said, "It's bed-time. Go and get ready."

He got up and went into the bedroom and undressed. He showered and rubbed himself pink. Back in the bedroom, he could hear the music she had put on the phonograph. It was the second movement of Prokofiev's "Classical" Symphony, where the orchestra is asleep and the high strings tiptoe in. It was the third time she had played it. He sat down to wait until the record was over, and when it was, and she didn't come or speak to him, he went to the living-room door and looked in.

She was gone.

He stood absolutely still and looked around the room. The whole time she had been there she had unostentatiously put everything back after they had looked at it. The amplifier was still on. The phonograph was off, because it shut itself off. The record album of the Prokofiev, standing edge-up on the floor by the amplifier, was waiting to receive the record that was still on the turntable.

He stepped into the room and switched off the amplifier. He was suddenly conscious that in doing so he had removed half of what she had left there. He looked down at the record album; then, without touching it, he turned out the lights and went to bed.

You'll see her tomorrow, he thought.

He thought, you didn't so much as touch her hand. If it weren't for your eyes and ears, you'd have no way of knowing her.

A little later something deep within him turned over and sighed luxuriously. Muhlenberg, it said to him, do you realize that not once during that entire evening did you stop and think: this is an Occasion, this is a Great Day? Not once. The whole thing was easy as breathing.

As he fell asleep he remembered he hadn't even asked her her name.

He awoke profoundly rested, and looked with amazement at his

alarm clock. It was only eight, and after what he had been through at the lab last night, plus what he had drunk, plus staying up so late, this feeling was a bonus indeed. He dressed quickly and got down to the lab early. The phone was already ringing. He told the coroner to bring Regalio and to come right down.

It was all very easy to explain in terms of effects; the burned morgue room took care of that. They beat causes around for an hour or so without any conclusion. Since Muhlenberg was so close to the Police Department, though not a member of it, they agreed to kill the story for the time being. If relatives or a carnival owner or somebody came along, that would be different. Meantime, they'd let it ride. It really wasn't so bad.

They went away, and Muhlenberg called the paper.

Budgie had not come to work or called. Perhaps she was out on a story, the switchboard suggested.

The day went fast. He got the morgue cleaned up and a lot done on his research project. He didn't begin to worry until the fourth time he called the paper — that was about five p.m. — and Budgie still hadn't come or called. He got her home phone number and called it. No; she wasn't there. She'd gone out early to work. Try her at the paper.

He went home and bathed and changed, looked up the address of Shank's and took a cab there. He was much too early. It was barely seven-fifteen.

Shank's was a corner bar of the old-fashioned type with plate-glass windows on its corner fronts and flyblown wainscoting behind them. The three-corner booths gave a view of the corner, and the corner did the same for the booths. Except for the corner blaze of light, the rest of the place was in darkness, punctuated here and there by the unreal blues and greens of beer signs in neon script.

Muhlenberg glanced at his watch when he entered, and was appalled. He knew now that he had been artificially busier and busier as the day wore on, and that it was only a weak effort to push aside the thoughts of Budgie and what might have happened to her. His busyness had succeeded in getting him into a spot where he would have nothing to do but sit and wait, and think his worries through.

He chose a booth on the mutual margins of the cave-like darkness and the pallid light, and ordered a beer.

If Mr. X were really interested in suppressing information about the two pathetic halves of the murdered monster in the park, he'd only done part of the job. Regalio, Al, Budgie and Muhlen-

berg knew about it. Regalio and Al had been all right when he had seen them this morning, and certainly no attempts had been made on him. On the other hand, he had been in and around the precinct station and its immediate neighborhood all day, and about the same thing applied to the ambulance staff.

But Budgie . . .

Not only was she vulnerable, she wasn't even likely to be missed for hours by anyone since she was so frequently out on stories. Stories! Why — as a reporter she presented the greatest menace of all to anyone who wanted to hide information!

With that thought came its corollary: Budgie was missing, and if she had been taken care of he, Muhlenberg, was next on the list. Had to be. He was the only one who had been able to take a good long look at the bodies. He was the one who had given the information to the reporter and the one who still had it to give. In other words, if Budgie had been taken care of, he could expect some sort of attack too, and quickly.

He looked around the place with narrowing eyes. This was a rugged section of town. Why was he here?

He had a lurching sense of shock and pain. The girl he'd met last night — that couldn't be a part of this thing. It mustn't be. And yet because of her he found him-

self here, like a sitting duck.

He suddenly understood his unwillingness to think about the significance of Budgie's disappearance.

"Oh, no," he said aloud.

Should he run?

Should he — and perhaps be wrong? He visualized the girl coming there, waiting for him, perhaps getting in some trouble in this dingy place, just because he'd gotten the wind up over his own fantasies.

He couldn't leave. Not until after eight anyway. What else then? If they got him, who would be next? Regalio, certainly. Then Al. Then the coroner himself.

Warn Regalio. That at least he might do, before it was too late. He jumped up.

There was, of course, someone in the phone booth. A woman. He swore and pulled the door open.

"Budgie!"

He reached in almost hysterically, pulled her out. She spun limply into his arms, and for an awful split second his thoughts were indescribable. Then she moved. She squeezed him, looked up incredulously, squeezed him again. "Muley! Oh, Muley, I'm so glad it's you!"

"Budgie, you lunkhead — where've you been?"

"Oh, I've had the most awful — the most wonderful —"

"Hey, yesterday you cried.

Isn't that your quota for the year?"

"Oh, shut up. Muley, Muley, no one could get mixed up more than I've been!"

"Oh," he said reflectively, "I dunno. Come on over here. Sit down. Bartender! Two double whisky sodas!" Inwardly, he smiled at the difference in a man's attitude toward the world when he has something to protect. "Tell me." He cupped her chin. "First of all, where have you been? You had me scared half to death."

She looked up at him, at each of his eyes in turn. There was a beseeching expression in her whole pose. "You won't laugh at me, Muley?"

"Some of this business is real un-funny."

"Can I really *talk* to you? I never tried." She said, as if there were no change of subject, "You don't know who I am."

"Talk then, so I'll know."

"Well," she began, "it was this morning. When I woke up. It was such a beautiful day! I went down to the corner to get the bus. I said to the man at the newsstand, "Post?" and dropped my nickel in his cup, and right in chorus with me was this man . . ."

"This man," he prompted.

"Yes. Well, he was a young man, about — oh, I don't know how old. Just right, anyway. And the newsdealer didn't know who to give the paper to because he

had only one left. We looked at each other, this fellow and I, and laughed out loud. The newsy heard my voice loudest, I guess, or was being chivalrous, and he handed the paper to me. The bus came along then and we got in, and the fellow, the young one, I mean, he was going to take a seat by himself but I said come on — help me read the paper — you helped me buy it."

She paused while the one-eyed bartender brought the drinks.

"We never did look at the paper. We sort of . . . talked. I never met anyone I could talk to like that. Not even you, Muley, even now when I'm trying so. The things that came out . . . as if I'd known him all my — no," she said, shaking her head violently, "not even like that. I don't know. I can't say. It was fine.

"We crossed the bridge and the bus ran alongside the meadow, out there between the park and the fairgrounds. The grass was too green and the sky was too blue and there was something in me that just wanted to explode. But good, I mean, good. I said I was going to play hookey. I didn't say I'd like to, or I felt like it. I said I was going to. And he said let's, as if I'd asked him, and I didn't question that, not one bit. I don't know where he was going or what he was giving up, but we pulled the cord and the bus stopped and

we got out and headed cross country."

"What did you do all day?" Muhlenberg asked as she sipped.

"Chased rabbits. Ran. Lay in the sun. Fed ducks. Laughed a lot. Talked. Talked a *whole* lot." Her eyes came back to the present, back to Muhlenberg. "Gosh, I don't know, Muley. I tried to tell myself all about it after he left me. I couldn't. Not so I'd believe it if I listened."

"And all this wound up in a crummy telephone booth?"

She sobered instantly. "I was supposed to meet him here. I couldn't just wait around home. I couldn't stomach the first faint thought of the office. So I just came here.

"I sat down to wait. I don't know why he asked me to meet him in a place like — what on earth is the matter with you?"

"Nothing," choked Muhlenberg. "I was having an original thought called 'It's a small world.'" He waved her forthcoming questions away. "Don't let me interrupt. You first, then me. There's something weird and wonderful going on here."

"Where was I? Oh. Well, I sat here waiting and feeling happy, and gradually the feeling went away and the gloom began to seep in. Then I thought about you, and the murder in the park, and that fantastic business at your lab last night, and I began to get

scared. I didn't know what to do. I was going to run from here, and then I had a reaction, and wondered if I was just scaring myself. Suppose he came and I wasn't here? I couldn't bear that. Then I got scared again and — and wondered if he was part of the whole thing, the Siamese-twin murder and all. And I hated myself for even thinking such a thing. I went into a real hassel. At last I squared myself away and figured the only thing to do was to call you up. And you weren't at the lab. And the coroner didn't know where you'd gone and — oh-h-h, *Muley!*"

"It meant that much?"

She nodded.

"Fickle bitch! Minutes after leaving your lover-boy —"

She put her hand over his mouth. "Watch what you say," she said fiercely. "This was no gay escapade, Muley. This was like — like nothing I've ever heard of. He didn't touch me, or act as if he wanted to. He didn't have to; it wasn't called for. The whole thing was the whole thing, and not a preliminary to anything else. It was — it was — oh, *damn* this language!"

Muhlenberg thought about the Prokofiev album standing upright by his amplifier. Damn it indeed, he thought. "What was his name?" he asked gently.

"His —" She snapped her head up, turned slowly to him. She whispered, "I never asked him. . . ."

and her eyes went quite round.

"I thought not." Why did I say that? he asked himself. I almost know. . . .

He said, suddenly, "Budge, do you love him?"

Her face showed surprise. "I hadn't thought about it. Maybe I don't know what love is. I thought I knew. But it was less than this." She frowned. "It was more than this, though, some ways."

"Tell me something. When he left you, even after a day like that, did you feel . . . that you'd lost something?"

She thought about it. "Why . . . no. No, I didn't. I was full up to here, and what he gave me he left with me. That's the big difference. No love's like that. Can you beat that? I didn't *lose* anything!"

He nodded. "Neither did I," he said.

"You *what*?"

But he wasn't listening. He was rising slowly, his eyes on the door.

The girl was there. She was dressed differently, she looked trim and balanced. Her face was the same, though, and her incredible eyes. She wore blue jeans, loafers, a heavy, rather loose sweater, and two soft-collar points gleamed against her neck and chin. Her hair hardly longer than his own, but beautiful, beautiful. . . .

He looked down, as he would have looked away from a great light. He saw his watch. It was eight o'clock. And he became aware of Budge looking fixedly at the figure in the door, her face radiant. "Muley, come on. Come on, Muley. There he is!"

The girl in the doorway saw him then and smiled. She waved and pointed at the corner booth, the one with windows on two streets. Muhlenberg and Budge went to her.

She sat down as they came to her. "Hello. Sit there. Both of you."

Side by side they sat opposite her. Budge stared in open admiration. Muhlenberg stared too, and something in the back of his mind began to grow, and grow, and — "No," he said, incredulously.

"Yes," she said, directly to him. "It's true." She looked at Budge. "She doesn't know yet, does she?"

Muhlenberg shook his head. "I hadn't time to tell her."

"Perhaps you shouldn't," said the girl.

Budge turned excitedly to Muhlenberg. "You know him!"

Muhlenberg said, with difficulty, "I know . . . know —"

The girl laughed aloud. "You're looking for a pronoun."

Budge said, "Muley, what's he mean? Let me in on it."

"An autopsy would have shown it, wouldn't it?" he demanded.

The girl nodded. "Very readily. That was a close call."

Budge looked from one to the other. "Will somebody tell me what in blazes this is all about?"

Muhlenberg met the girl's gaze. She nodded. He put an arm around Budgie. "Listen, girl reporter. Our — our friend here's something . . . something new and different."

"Not new," said the girl. "We've been around for thousands of years."

"Have you now!" He paused to digest that, while Budgie squirmed and protested, "But — but — but —"

"Shush, you," said Muhlenberg, and squeezed her shoulders gently. "What you spent the afternoon with isn't a man, Budgie, any more than what I spent most of the night with was a woman. Right?"

"Right," the girl said.

"And the Siamese twins weren't Siamese twins, but two of our friend's kind who — who —"

"They were in syzygy." An inexpressible sadness was in the smooth, almost contralto, all but tenor voice.

"In what?" asked Budgie.

Muhlenberg spelled it for her. "In some forms of life," he started to explain, "well, the microscopic animal called paramecium's a good example — reproduction is accomplished by fission. The creature elongates, and so does its nu-

cleus. Then the nucleus breaks in two, and one half goes to each end of the animal. Then the rest of the animal breaks, and presto — two paramecia."

"But you — he —"

"Shaddup," he said. "I'm lecturing. The only trouble with reproduction by fission is that it affords no variation of strains. A single line of paramecium would continue to reproduce that way until, by the law of averages, its dominant traits would all be non-survival ones, and bang — no more paramecia. So they have another process to take care of that difficulty. One paramecium rests beside another, and gradually their contacting side walls begin to fuse. The nuclei gravitate toward that point. The side walls then break down, so that the nuclei then have access to one another. The nuclei flow together, mix and mingle, and after a time they separate and half goes into each animal. Then the side walls close the opening, break away from one another, and each animal goes its way."

"That is syzygy. It is in no sense a sexual process, because paramecia have no sex. It has no direct bearing on reproduction either — that can happen with or without syzygy." He turned to their companion. "But I'd never heard of syzygy in the higher forms."

The faintest of smiles. "It's

unique with us, on this planet anyway."

"What's the rest of it?" he demanded.

"Our reproduction? We're parthenogenetic females."

"Y-you're a female?" breathed Budgie.

"A term of convenience," said Muhlenberg. "Each individual has both kinds of sex organs. They're self-fertilizing."

"That's a — a what do you call it? — a hermaphrodite," said Budgie. "Excuse me," she added in a small voice.

Muhlenberg and the girl laughed uproariously; and the magic of that creature was that the laughter couldn't hurt. "It's a very different thing," said Muhlenberg. "Hermaphrodites are human. She — our friend there — isn't."

"You're the humanest thing I ever met in my whole life," said Budgie ardently.

The girl reached across the table and touched Budgie's arm. Muhlenberg suspected that that was the very first physical contact either he or Budgie had yet received from the creature, and that it was a rare thing and a great compliment.

"Thank you," the girl said softly. "Thank you very much for saying that." She nodded to Muhlenberg. "Go on."

"Technically — though I know of no case where it has actually

been possible — hermaphrodites can have contact with either sex. But parthenogenetic females won't, can't, and wouldn't. They don't need to. Humans cross strains along with the reproductive process. Parthenogenesis separates the two acts completely." He turned to the girl. "Tell me, how often do you reproduce?"

"As often as we wish to."

"And syzygy?"

"As often as we must. Then — we must."

"And that is —"

"It's difficult. It's like the paramecia's, essentially, but it's infinitely more complex. There's cell meeting and interflow, but in tens and then dozens, hundreds, then thousands of millions of cells. The join begins here —" she put her hand at the approximate location of the human heart — "and extends. But you saw it in those two I burned. You are one of the few human beings who ever have."

"That isn't what I saw," he reminded her gently.

She nodded, and again there was that deep sadness. "That murder was such a stupid, incredible, unexpected thing!"

"Why were they in the park?" he asked, his voice thick with pity. "Why out there, in the open, where some such human slugs could find them?"

"They took a chance, because it was important to them," she said wearily. She looked up, and

her eyes were luminous. "We love the outdoors. We love the earth, the feel and smell of it, what lives from it and in it. Especially then. It was such a deep thicket, such an isolated pocket. It was the merest accident that those — those men found them there. They couldn't move. They were — well, medically you could call it unconscious. Actually, there — there never was a consciousness like the one which comes with syzygy."

"Can you describe it?"

She shook her head slowly, and it was no violation of her complete frankness. "Do you know, you couldn't describe sexuality to me so that I could understand it? I have no — no comparison, no analogies. It —" she looked from one to the other — "it amazes me. In some ways I envy it. I know it is a strife, which we avoid, for we are very gentle. But you have a capacity for enjoying strife, and all the pain, all the misery and poverty and cruelty which you suffer, is the cornerstone of everything you build. And you build more than anyone or anything in the known universe."

Budgie was wide-eyed. "You envy us? You?"

She smiled. "Don't you think the things you admire me for are rather commonplace among my own kind? It's just that they're rare in humans."

Muhlenberg said slowly, "Just

what is your relationship to humanity?"

"It's symbiotic, of course."

"Symbiotic? You live with us, and us with you, like the cellulose-digesting microbes in a termite? Like the yucca moth, which can eat only nectar from the yucca cactus, which can spread its pollen only through the yucca moth?"

She nodded. "It's purely symbiotic. But it isn't easy to explain. We live on that part of humans which makes them different from animals."

"And in turn —"

"We cultivate it in humans."

"I don't understand that," said Budgie flatly.

"Look into your legends. We're mentioned often enough there. Who were the sexless angels? Who is the streamlined fat boy on your Valentine's Day cards? Where does inspiration come from? Who knows three notes of a composer's new symphony, and whistles the next phrase as he walks by the composer's house? And — most important to you two — who really understands that part of love between humans which is not sexual — because we can understand no other kind? Read your history, and you'll see where we've been. And in exchange we get the building — bridges, yes, and aircraft and soon, now, space-ships. But other kinds of building too. Songs and poetry and this new

thing, this increasing sense of the oneness of all your species. And now it is fumbling toward a United Nations, and later it will grope for the stars; and where it builds, we thrive."

"Can you name this thing you get from us — this thing that is the difference between men and the rest of the animals?"

"No. But call it a sense of achievement. Where you feel that most, you feed us most. And you feel it most when others of your kind enjoy what you build."

"Why do you keep yourselves hidden?" Budgie suddenly asked. "Why?" She wrung her hands on the edge of the table. "You're so beautiful!"

"We have to hide," the other said gently. "You still kill anything that's . . . different."

Muhlenberg looked at that open, lovely face and felt a sickness, and he could have cried. He said, "Don't you ever kill anything?" and then hung his head, because it sounded like a defense for the murdering part of humanity. Because it was.

"Yes," she said very softly, "we do."

"You can *hate* something?"

"It isn't hate. Anyone who hates, hates himself as well as the object of his hate. There's another emotion called righteous anger. That makes us kill."

"I can't conceive of such a thing."

"What time is it?"
"Almost eight-forty."

She raised herself from her booth and looked out to the corner. It was dark now, and the usual crowd of youths had gathered under the street-lights.

"I made appointments with three more people this evening," she said. "They are murderers. Just watch." Her eyes seemed to blaze.

Under the light, two of the youths were arguing. The crowd, but for a prodding yelp or two, had fallen silent and was beginning to form a ring. Inside the ring, but apart from the two who were arguing, was a third — smaller, heavier and, compared with the sharp-creased, bright-tied arguers, much more poorly dressed, in an Eisenhower jacket with one sleeve tattered up to the elbow.

What happened then happened with frightening speed. One of the arguers smashed the other across the mouth. Spitting blood, the other staggered back, made a lightning move into his coat pocket. The blade looked for all the world like a golden fan as it moved in the cyclic pulsations of the street-lamp. There was a bubbling scream, a deep animal grunt, and two bodies lay tangled and twitching on the sidewalk while blood gouted and seeped and defied the sharpness of creases and the colors of ties.

Far up the block a man shouted and a whistle shrilled. Then the street corner seemed to become a great repulsing pole for humans. People ran outward, rayed outward, until, from above, they must have looked like a great splash in mud, reaching out and out until the growing ring broke and the particles scattered and were gone. And then there were only the bleeding bodies and the third one, the one with the tattered jacket, who hovered and stepped and waited and did not know which way to go. There was the sound of a single pair of running feet, after the others had all run off to silence, and these feet belonged to a man who ran fast and ran closer and breathed heavily through a shrieking police whistle.

The youth in the jacket finally turned and ran away, and the policeman shouted once around his whistle, and then there were two sharp reports and the youth, running hard, threw up his hands and fell without trying to turn his face away, and skidded on it and lay still with one foot turned in and the other turned out.

The girl in the dark sweater and blue jeans turned away from the windows and sank back into her seat, looking levelly into the drawn faces across the table. "Those were the men who killed those two in the park," she said

in a low voice, "and that is how we kill."

"A little like us," said Muhlenberg weakly. He found his handkerchief and wiped off his upper lip. "Three of them for two of you."

"Oh, you don't understand," she said, and there was pity in her voice. "It wasn't because they killed those two. It was because they pulled them apart."

Gradually, the meaning of this crept into Muhlenberg's awed mind, and the awe grew with it. For here was a race which separated insemination from the mixing of strains, and apart from them, in clean-lined definition, was a third component, a psychic interflow. Just a touch of it had given him a magic night and Budgie an enchanted day; hours without strife, without mixed motives or misinterpretations.

If a human, with all his grossly efficient combination of functions, could be led to appreciate one light touch to that degree, what must it mean to have that third component, pure and in essence, torn apart in its fullest flow? This was worse than any crime could be to a human; and yet, where humans can claim clear consciences while jailing a man for a year for stealing a pair of shoes, these people repay the crudest sacrilege of all with a quick clean blow. It was removal, not punishment. Punish-

ment was alien and inconceivable to them.

He slowly raised his face to the calm, candid eyes of the girl. "Why have you shown us all this?"

"You needed me," she said simply.

"But you came up to destroy those bodies so no one would know —"

"And I found you two, both needing what the other had, and blind to it. No, not blind. I remember you said that if you ever could really share something, you could be very close." She laughed. "Remember your niche, the one that's finished early and never exactly filled? I told you at the time that it wouldn't be enough by itself if it *were* filled, and anyone completely without it wouldn't have enough either. And you —" She smiled at Budgie. "You never made any secret about what you wanted. And there the two of you were, each wanting what you already had, and ignoring what you needed."

"Headline!" said Budgie, "Common Share Takes Stock."

"Subhead!" grinned Muhlenberg, "Man With A Niche Meets Girl With An Itch."

The girl slid out of the booth. "You'll do," she said.

"Wait! You're not going to leave us! Aren't we ever going to see you again?"

"Not knowingly. You won't remember me, or any of this."

"How can you take away —"

"Shush, Muley. You know she can."

"Yes, I guess she — wait though — wait! You give us all this knowledge just so we'll understand — and then you take it all away again. What good will that do us?"

She turned toward them. It may have been because they were still seated and she was standing, but she seemed to tower over them. In a split second of fugue, he had the feeling that he was looking at a great light on a mountain.

"Why, you poor things — didn't you know? Knowledge and understanding aren't props for one another. Knowledge is a pile of bricks, and understanding is a way of building. Build for me!"

They were in a joint called Shank's. After the triple killing, and the wild scramble to get the story phoned in, they started home.

"Muley," she asked suddenly, "what's syzygy?"

"What on earth made you ask me that?"

"It just popped into my head. What is it?"

"A non-sexual interflow between the nuclei of two animals."

"I never tried that," she said thoughtfully.

"Well, don't until we're married," he said. They began to hold hands while they walked.

(Continued from page 69)

The savage, the barbarian will survive, but the women of intelligence will be unable to carry on the torch of existence. We will either go childless or we shall die.

"We have to have metal. Not to build bridges, or airplanes, or ships; not for communication between continents; or for the manufacturing of mighty machinery, but just a little metal to make a few instruments, so our women can be saved.

"We love each other, John Stafford. And that love can only come into its fullest power and beauty when we have a child, but I know, I am sure of it after last night, that if I have a child, I shall die, and I do not want to die. I do not want to leave you; life means too much to me, and I am not sure that you would ever smile again if you went through what Peter Arndt went through today.

"So, if you love me, you will in some way find some metal. We can hammer it roughly with rocks, we can polish it with stone. Thus we can make tools with which to effect more things out of metal. And will you do it, John Stafford, for my sake? Find just a little metal?"

"I'll try," replied John Stafford.

Chapter XXVI A Lone Scientist Despairs

The selection of Mount Minsi as a scientific laboratory had in it all the elements of a grand despair. For thousands of centuries no one had ever thought of living on such a place. Now it held the home of one of America's foremost scientists.

Anthony Burke had back of him the traditions of all the great sci-

tists of the world. He was as well versed in the history of invention as he was in the exact formulae of every intricate chemical or physical problem. As an apprentice he had served under a few of the great inventors of the electrical age. He had even contributed more than a mite to the final perfection of television.

Of all the great scientists of the world, he had arrived the earliest at a clear realization of what the red dust of metals would mean to civilization. He spent the first twenty-four hours following the destruction of the hairsprings in watches, in a careful, painstaking survey of the entire problem. After that he selected from his laboratory a collection of chemicals and instruments, all of an absolutely non-metallic nature. He presumed, and rightly so, that a physical condition affecting one metal, steel, would in time affect all metals.

His next step was the selection of a site for a workshop and the transportation of his scientific equipment. Not being a sociologist, he had a clearer idea of the effect of the metal doom on machinery than on the human soul. Realizing this personal deficiency, he called on a student of human behavior and asked for an approximate description of what would happen to the structure of human society under the new conditions. A few hours with this man convinced him that life as it had been under former surroundings would become extremely difficult and all scientific study an utter impossibility. He determined to seek isolation.

On the third day of the new era he was spending all his wealth for the accomplishment of two purposes. One was the building of a stone house on

the top of Mount Minsi; the second was the transportation of his scientific apparatus and supplies to that house. He spent his money like water, realizing that the time was rapidly approaching when it would be more worthless than water. The people of the Water Gap were glad to take his money, and to do his work for him, though they considered him insane.

Toward the end of the building operations, he had to work alone, but the final result was rather satisfactory. He had a substantial two-room house, stone walls, a wooden roof-tree, and a slate roof. There was a fireplace, as well as ample light from windows. One room he used to live in, the other to work in. There he determined to stay in splendid isolation and to redeem mankind from the curse of the second stone age.

He spent the first year of his study in an endeavor to rebuild his instruments of precision, which had been wrecked by the destruction of their metal parts. He felt that the study of the disease which had wrought such havoc among the metals of the world could only be accomplished by the use of a well-equipped laboratory, and this he sought to organize. At the end of the year he had been able to prepare some metallic-like substances out of organic materials, such as casein and cellulose, but the shaping and utilization of such materials without instruments was more than even his trained mind could elucidate. At the end of the year he had built a workable scale and a very simple microscope.

All through this effort to determine the nature of the Metal Doom he was tormented by the knowledge that he

was the first great scientist who had tried to work in a stone age. For thousands of years, all the great students and inventors had been aided by instruments of metal. More and more they had come to depend on these instruments, fingers of steel, arms of copper, brass and bronze. Everything they did, even everything they thought, was tensely and tightly connected with the mineral kingdom. Benjamin Franklin may have thought of harnessing the electricity from the clouds, but he needed the metallic key to aid him.

Anthony Burke placed the primitive scales and microscope on a table and spent long hours, lonely days, desperate months in front of them, dreaming of the past greatness of his profession. He visioned his wonderful predecessors, the Masters of the past, took up each of their great inventions, and wondered how they would have proceeded, what they would have accomplished, and how they would have reacted to their failures, if they had been forced to work in an age of stone.

And he saw, or he thought he saw, that man had risen from the ape, because he had learned the use of minerals. That, and the utilization of fire, had opened a great void between the human and the animal, had made the one a demigod and the other a howling quadruped, digging ground-nuts and forgetting from one minute to the next, the determination of the moment past.

He felt, though in that he was obviously wrong, that a race, deprived of metals, would sink back into the past levels of anthropological life. Fire remained, but perhaps even that would some day be remembered vaguely as

one of the last of the great arts.

Anthony Burke passed into the third year of his isolation a miserable mystic. At times he felt that insanity would end his problems for him. He became mentally stagnant. Spiritually he was simply a scientist in despair.

Chapter XXVII

A Celebrated Picnic

"I want to propose something, Dotty," said John Stafford to his wife. "Let us go back to the colony and talk things over with Hubler. There is a fellow that has imagination. I bet that if you talk to him about the need of metal instruments the way you talked to me the other night, he will just imagine some way of making use of something or other to help you out. Now, I am just a farmer, sort of a New York cowboy, but he had real ability."

"But I want you to get the credit for the discovery, John."

"That is fine of you, but I simply am not talented that way. We will go and see Hubler. First we are going to have a picnic. What do you say to our climbing Mount Minsi?"

"That would be some climb, John."

"Sure would. I bet no one has been up it since the day the world went smash: Only lovers and fools ever climbed it anyway in the old days and now there is less reason to go to the top than there ever was. So, let us take some lunch and make a day of it, and if we get to the top late in the day, suppose we stay all night and see the sunrise from the top."

"I believe I should like that," answered Mrs. Stafford.

The climbing of Mount Minsi would have been considered child's play by the experienced Alpine mountaineer. The ascent is gradual, and even in the steepest part there is no decided element of danger. The walk, in the old days, was interrupted by various pleasure houses, built at promontories carefully selected for the splendor of the view at various points. These offered resting places for the tired vacationist. After the advent of the automobile and the decline of the pedestrian, few dared the entire climb. In late years a survey of the Gap from an airplane had become a satisfactory substitute for walking to the top of Minsi. After the early days of the second Stone Age no one had ventured to the summit. The inventor had been left in isolated solitude.

To Stafford and his bride, alive with the joy of life, the conquest of the summit offered no difficulties. Leaving their horses at the first promontory, they arrived at the top of the mountain at the end of a brisk three hours walk. The view from either direction was only limited by the optical deficiencies of the human eye; the beauty of it was beyond words.

But the greatest thrill of the day came when they saw a stone house perched on the highest part of the mountain, and smoke coming from the chimney of that house. A house, fire! These could mean nothing but human habitation.

"I think we ought to call on him," suggested Stafford.

"How do you know it is a him? It might be a her," countered Dotty.

"I do not think so. No woman would live up here."

"She might if there was a man up here and he loved her."

But by that time Stafford had walked up to the door and knocked on it. Always the careful, prepared barbarian, he had one hand behind his back and in that hand was a small but very sharp tomahawk.

A small man with long, disordered, white hair and soiled clothes came to the door.

"Well?" he asked. "Who are you and what do you want?"

"I am John Stafford and this is my wife. We were climbing the mountain, wanted to have a picnic dinner up here, and we saw your house and the smoke and thought we would come over here and have you join us. I mean we should like to have you share our lunch with us?"

The whitehaired man trembled with excitement.

"You will have to excuse my actions," he explained. "I have lived up here for over two years and you are the first people who have come to see me; in fact, you are the first ones I have spoken to in all that time. Living by myself, without any company and worried like I am, has made me a little queer. I would ask you to come in, but you know how a place looks when there is no woman around to look after things. My name is Anthony Burke."

But right there Dotty interrupted him.

"Not the Anthony Burke who invented the magnetooamplifier for the latest model of the Tesla Television Cabinet?" she asked.

"Yes, I did that. At least, they named it after me."

There was no mistaking the admira-

tion in the young woman's eyes. They fairly glistened as she continued.

"Then you are the very man I want to see. I have known about you for years. You had the reputation of being one of America's greatest scientists. After the world crashed we often talked about you and wondered what had happened to you. I do not know what you have been doing, but I know what I want you to do. Can't you make some metal for me? Something that is hard and can be worked into different shapes and given a polish? I don't care what kind of metal it is, just so it can be used to make instruments with. Have you thought about it? Do you realize that women are dying every day because we are in an age of stone? Won't you please use your ability and do something, something for the women in the world and the little babies?"

The man started to cry. He wiped his face with his sleeve.

"That is what I have been working on for over two years," he sighed. "For over two years and I have accomplished nothing."

"Let's have our picnic lunch," interrupted Stafford.

"You will feel better when you eat one of Mrs. Stafford's meals."

Chapter XVIII An Inspiration

Stafford and his bride tried to throw an atmosphere of good cheer and happiness over the lunch. They felt that the inventor was unnecessarily morbid, that he had been alone so much, with nothing but failure for company, that he had become almost psychotic. Dotty particularly endeavored to cheer him

and even went so far as to tell a few funny stories. Anthony Burke refused to laugh, but at last he passed the stage of disconnected sentences and became able to take an appreciable part in the conversation.

"Something had to happen to humanity," he remarked.

"You think," answered Stafford, "that if it had not been the Metal Doom, it would have been something else just as terrible?"

"I believe so. You see, the human race was drifting into a mental and spiritual condition that was rapidly making continuance of life on a large scale impossible. Many peculiar and abnormal things happened after the World War. All of the human race was sick.

"There was a marked decline in the moral concept of right and wrong. Everybody became twisted in his thinking. Russia went socialist. The United States, with the control of the world's gold in her hand, went into an emotional, financial panic, and had over ten million out of work and starving. Then, with wheat at thirty cents and cotton at six cents, her economists favored the destruction of the surplus of both crops to raise the price while millions were starving and freezing for the lack of these staples.

"At the same time the people were attending amusements by the millions. Everybody was driving an automobile; the working day was shortened, the working week was curtailed, wages were going up, good positions fewer, people had more leisure than they knew what to do with, the racketeers ruled the cities, and the worthwhile people did not care enough to vote them out of power. Crime ruled, vice flour-

ished, poverty increased. The rich became richer, the poor poorer, the more a man made the more he spent and nobody counted his change."

"Stop!" cried Mrs. Stafford. "Your indictment of society is too terrible. There were some good people before the crash."

"Of course there were," answered Stafford. "But what Mr. Burke is trying to show is that the good people were either not strong enough or sufficiently interested in the welfare of the human race to secure control."

"That is it," answered the inventor. "In thinking it all over, it seems to me that civilization was sick; and it was a rather unpleasant illness. There was something about it that just seemed as though it had grown so fast that its elemental parts could no longer function and that it was bound to decay. Something had to happen, and it did."

"Perhaps it was a good thing," mused Stafford. "Society was sick. Perhaps it had all kinds of spiritual bacteria working on it. Evidently it had reached a point where it could not bring about its own cure. But something had to happen, and I have been all through the change and I believe, Mr. Burke, that when we recover from this illness we are not going to be as sick as we were. We are going to be more unselfish; our vision is going to be clearer. Our value of events is going to be more perfect; little things are not going to upset us so; we are going to be nicer, kinder people than we were and if the time ever comes when we shall be able to form some kind of government, it will be a better form of republic than the one whose death we have seen. Of course,

there has been a lot of suffering, but it may be that out of it will come something worthwhile."

"What John is trying to say," explained his wife, "is that the same thing has happened to the human race that happens to an individual when he is very sick. If he recovers, his health is better than it was before. I am not much of a scientist, but perhaps you can understand our meaning if I tell you that it is just as if the world were purified or sterilized by—by fire; that is what I am trying to say, sterilized by fire and all the impurities and dross and germs burned out and nothing left but pure gold."

"And the red rust, the metal doom, was just a means to an end; it was just a symbol. The metals became sick and collapsed, just as humanity did."

Stafford looked p the valley, and then he looked across to Mount Taminy. He took a deep breath.

"I am just an ordinary farmer," he said at last, "but it seems to me there is an idea there in what Dotty is saying. If the metals were sick, perhaps they could be cured by fire."

Anthony Burke sprang into the air as though touched with an electric current.

"That's it! Oh! Why couldn't I have thought of it myself? I had fire all the time. Common sense ought to have told me. And I had to wait till a farmer and his wife pointed the way. Perhaps it will work and perhaps it won't, but at least it ought to be tried. Until we do try, we won't know. Mr. Stafford, you and your wife go and get your things and come up here and live with me and help me. You have to be in on this. It is your suggestion. Fire! Oh!

Hurry! I cannot wait till I get started."

Chapter XXIX A Little Piece of Iron

Stafford left Dotty up on the mountain with the old inventor, while he went back to Hilltop. Returning, he brought the three horses well laden with necessities of life. After a night's sleep and a well-prepared breakfast, perhaps the most satisfactory meal the scientist had eaten for months, the two men started to prepare a furnace, while the interested woman looked on.

Burke realized that he would need a high degree of heat. For fuel he had coal, charcoal and wood. None would give sufficient heat without a forced draft; so the first thing necessary was a bellows. A bellows of wood and skins was not the easiest thing in the world to make. Thus, the first day passed with little or nothing accomplished. A week likewise went by. In fact, it was a month before the crude furnace was made. The chimney was of stone and cement, the fuel was anthracite, and a porcelain crucible properly placed above the fire was to hold the red rust.

Stafford and the inventor had made a special trip to the D.L. and W. tracks to gather the red rust. The porcelain vessel was filled with this heavy powder; in fact, it was packed in as tightly as possible. Then the opening into the furnace was closed with stone and clay, and the fire underneath started. Stafford and Burke took turns at the handle of the bellows, and there was no doubt about the heat that was being generated.

"It looks hot enough," cried Dotty, "to kill any germ."

At the end of three hours the fire died away. There was nothing to do now except to let the furnace cool off and break it open. Followed anxious hours. At last Stafford took his stone ax and carefully smashed out a hole in the furnace. There was the porcelain pot, blackened but unbroken. It was still too hot to touch. They had no way of taking it out, and they could not see what was inside it.

"I cannot wait!" cried the inventor.

"You are just like a child before Chirstmas," laughed Dotty. "Come and eat your supper."

The next day they pulled the porcelain pot out of the furnace. The red rust was gone and in its place, at the bottom of the vessel, was a mass of a black substance which had a peculiar glisten to it.

"The metallic luster," cried Burke. "It looks like iron, it feels like iron, pure iron."

He turned the crucible over and the piece of metal dropped out. Stafford caught it before it touched the ground.

"It bends," he commented.

"It's malleable," commented the scientist. "Get me your stone ax. See! I can pound it into shape."

"I wanted it to be hard," complained Dotty.

"We can harden it. We can do anything with it that we used to. The important thing is that we have it. And if we have iron redeemed from the red rust, we can do the same thing with copper and gold and nickel and tin. We can make brass as Tubal Cain did. All we need now is an anvil and something to hold the piece of iron

with and then we can do anything. We can make tools, and, once we can make tools, we can go on and redeem society. Think of it! Stafford. *We are out of the stone age.* One experiment, one success, *one little piece of iron marks the transition into the new age of metals.*"

"I want you to hurry up and make my instruments," urged Dotty, now more than ever the old Dr. Perno; and yet, she was not the woman of the past. "Make your tools as fast as you can and then make some steel. Women are dying every day, and it may be my turn to die some day."

Chapter XXX The Metal Workers

The piece of iron made on top of Mount Minsi is one of the most valuable possessions of the new Republic. Its recovery from the red rust of the D.L. and W. railroad tracks marked the end of the Second Stone Age.

Men had recovered the use of metals, but, though they were free from the tyranny of stone, they were still poor, as far as the abundance of all metals was concerned. The red rust was reclaimed as fast as possible, but it took a large amount to make even a little piece of healthy metal. When the mines were again worked, it was found that the metal ores under the surface had also been affected. Consequently, the world emerged into an age where every piece of iron; copper or tin, was of the greatest value. In fact, one of the earliest laws of the new nation was one regulating the use of metal and allowing it to be used only for certain definite purposes which would serve best the good of the national life.

The news spread. The idea was so simple, the technique so easily learned that soon all the little colonies were reclaiming metals from the red rust. They soon found, however, that it was one thing to obtain the metals and another to work them into valuable form. Metal workers, who understood the hand-working at the forge, the hammering of a hot piece of metal into a horseshoe, or the tempering of a piece of steel till it was able to take a razor edge, were few. For fifty years man had worked on metals with machinery instead of with his hands. Now there was no machinery. Everything had to start at the beginning of things. There was no essential difference between the metallurgy of the Phoenicians and that of the members of the Stafford Colony. Perhaps the men of Tyre and Sidon were more expert.

With the reclamation of metals came a new courage. The thinkers realized that it would be long before the old civilization was restored; the great leaders were not sure that it was worth the effort to bring it back. Mankind had learned the lesson of false values, of fictitious wealth, of cruel monopolies. There was bound to come a reaction, an effort to once more use the great inventions of the past, but with this determination came another thought, that much of the hardness of life that had come with the age of electrical machinery must be avoided in the new metal age.

The desire to work with the metals was overpowering and universal. No matter what else a man or woman could do, he or she wanted to make something out of iron, copper, or tin. During the months of deprivation,

humanity had been hungry for the little pieces of metal that everyone had taken for granted for hundreds of years. To a woman, the making of a needle, the gradual sharpening and polishing and the laborious boring of the eye seemed to be the greatest cause of happiness, and once it was made and threaded and sewed with, there came a great sense of accomplishment. In the same way, the men worked to make knives, hinges for doors, forks to roast meat on.

Gradually, as the metallic necessities of life were obtained, the scientists began to restore, in the simplest ways, the mechanical greatness of the former age. The population was so reduced, the poverty of material things so great, that it was realized that mass production would take years to materialize, but the great men wanted to leave a record of the past, while that record was still fresh in the memory of the living generation. Thus, one set of men built an automobile, another a typewriter, while a third group cut out type and began a crude printing press. The most interesting feature of communication was the complete loss of interest in the telephone and telegraph and the frantic effort to manufacture and put into use wireless. Within a year each little community had the ability to send and receive messages.

With the restoration of rapid communication came a rapid renewal of the bond of sympathy between separated groups. Men again began to talk of the possibility of restoration of state and national government. While the intensive centralization of the past was to be avoided it was felt necessary to have the entire United States in close

touch. It would never be the old nation, but the thinkers hoped that it would be a better one. Mackson's Constitution was taken out of the pigeon hole and carefully considered. It became the foundation for the new Government.

From the first a constant effort was made to avoid the economic and social errors of the past. It was realized that there existed a profound functional difference between men, that some would be industrious and others indolent, some become wealthy and others remain poor, some achieve a high intelligence while others would remain morons. But all the colonies decided that every man, so long as he obeyed certain ethical commandments, had a right to the necessities of life. There would remain hardships but no poverty, luxuries but no men of superwealth. The gulf between rich and poor was wiped out. At the same time the right of the individual to live his own life was respected. He could live as he pleased and work as he pleased, so long as he contributed a substantial tribute to the public welfare.

The underlying thought was that there should come the greatest benefit from the new metal age with none of the previous hardness of life.

Chapter XXXI The Curtain Drops

"Your husband," Stafford remarked to Ruth Hubler, "has become one of the great men of the new era. I believe he could be the first President of the new Republic if he were ambitious for honor. It was all due to his imagination."

Ruth sighed. "Even with his great

imagination," she said, "I feel sure that he never was able to imagine how lonely Angelica and I have been for his company. Of course, I wanted him to do all he could for the Stafford Colony, but it does seem as though he might be able to spend a little time with his family."

"You ought to be proud of him, dear," said Mrs. Stafford.

"Oh! I suppose so. Come, Angelica, say good-bye to the twins and we will go home."

So, they said good-bye to John and Dotty Stafford and the two little Stafford babies and went to their home.

There was no doubt that Paul Hubler had been away from home a great deal. Pleading business and important engagements, he often left early in the morning and did not come back till Angelica was asleep. The little girl was not sure at times as to whether she really had a father or not.

The Stafford Colony was a flourishing one. From the first it had possessed a number of well-educated people who, in addition to their intelligence, were blessed with common sense. The women who had come from Shawnee had all married. In fact, there was not one bachelor or old maid in the colony. The health of the community was excellent and the large number of sturdy babies gave promise of a wonderful future. Already plans were being made for the opening of a community school.

Dotty Stafford had attained her desire. The little ten-bed hospital was equipped with all the instruments needed to care for the emergencies of the Colony. From the day the first piece of iron was made she worked intently on this problem. The instru-

ments she had made were not the beautiful polished tools of the past era but they were far better than the nothingness of the Second Stone Age. To the credit of her determination it can be said that no more women and children died for lack of proper care. Her husband felt that she was more of a doctor than she was a wife, but had to admit that she made a wonderful mother.

One morning Hubler actually slept late and had breakfast with his family. As a further surprise, he told them, at the breakfast table, that they were all going on a vacation, and that he would be ready to start right after dinner if they had their clothes packed. To show them he was in earnest, he drove around in a two-wheel cart, and tying the horse to the post in front of the house, started to help carry out the bags.

They had a cold dinner and then started off. Ruth and the little girl rode in the cart on top of the bundles of clothes and bedding, while Hubler walked in front of the horse, his stone lance in hand and his bow and arrows slung on his back. He was one of the men who clung rather lovingly to the weapons which had served him so well in the dark days of the past.

It was fall. The roads were covered with autumn leaves. Ruth made a coronet of the brown and golden beauties for Angelica. They had a merry time, and the two women so thoroughly enjoyed themselves that it was not till the horse stopped and the husband announced the end of the trip, that they realized where they were. And then Ruth gasped.

The were back at the old farm, back to the house that had sheltered them

on that momentous escapade, when they had fled from the city of ruined hopes.

They were back home!

The house had been repaired; the door no longer sagged but swung on three sturdy iron hinges; the roof was as good as new. The fences were in perfect order and the gates were so perfectly grand. Two cows grazed contentedly in the meadow and there were a goat and a kid. The little barn was swept and in order and the spring of water was singing a song of welcome. The happy woman jumped from the cart and ran into the house. Everything was clean, a polished kettle hung over the wood in the fireplace. All that was necessary was to start a fire and begin to cook supper.

"It's perfect!" she gasped to her husband who had followed her into the room. "Who ever did it all?"

"I did. At least most of it. I have been spending my days here for ever so long. You see, I wanted to surprise you."

"And are we going to live here, Daddy?"

"You bet we are."

"We are going to be happy!" cried Ruth. "It will be just like living in the dear old Stone Age all over again."

"Exactly!" agreed Hubler. "We will have all the happiness of the Stone Age and most of the conveniences of the metal age. If the disaster served no other purpose, it at least drove us out of the city. Everybody is happier if he can plant his feet on old Mother Earth, and I hope that never again will cities rise as they did in the past, giant beehives, where all individualism was crushed and where the struggle for

existence overshadowed the really worthwhile parts of life."

They had a wonderful afternoon and a delightful supper. Just as they were clearing up the dishes, they heard a sound of shouting down the road. From force of habit Hubler jumped for his stone ax. It was needless.

The People of the Stafford Colony had come for a house-warming. They stayed to spend the evening. There were speeches and singing. At last Stafford spoke.

"We have come here tonight to ask

a favor of you, Paul Hubler," he said. "Will you go to Washington as our representative?"

Hubler shook his head, but Stafford insisted:

"You must go. We need you there. Your wonderful imagination will be of value to the new nation."

"It is kind of you to ask me," replied Paul Hubler, "but I cannot imagine Ruth and Angelica could possibly get along without me."

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GO BACK

By CHARLES V. DEVET

You've heard the story about the man who moved back through time and murdered his own grandfather? Well, don't worry; this isn't it! So many yarns are variations on this theme that it has become a science-fiction cliche. In fact, most time-travel stories are pretty much an old-hat routine these days, and editors flinch whenever they run into one.

Which is why we flinched when Charles DeVet tossed the ms. of Never Go Back on our desk. But because we have a fine large admiration for his ability, we swallowed our qualms (they're mint-flavored) and read what, on the surface, promised to be just one more tired tale of time travel. That our fears were groundless is evidenced by the fact that the story is proudly presented in these pages.

SUCCESS! He had returned! But as he stood with the warm rain splashing against his shoulders and running sluggishly down his naked body, the feeling of triumph he should have felt was dulled and numbed by a presentiment of disaster. Unease, tinged with a sense of horror, centered at the pit of his stomach like a lead weight. An aura of sourceless despair seemed to surround him. He felt it reach for him.

There was just enough light to make out, vaguely, the features of the old deserted house in front of him.

He must not be found here without clothes, he thought, as he walked around the wing of the house. His legs felt heavy and he had to lift them with an obvious effort. It was as though the night air had become viscous and clung to his legs.

The second window was unlatched, as he had expected. He raised it and crawled through.

Groping carefully in the dark, dim mists of

memory returned as he felt remembered pieces of furniture scattered about the room. In the downstairs bedroom he found the old iron bed still standing in its corner. Ripping a tattered curtain from one of the windows, he wiped himself dry.

He lay on the bed and curled up to sleep. The summer night was warm and the old house still held its trapped heat. He'd need no blankets.

This was the same bed his grandfather had died in months before, but it gave him no feeling of unrest to sleep here. He had always liked his grandfather, and the liking had been returned.

The bed had a faint odor of mold and mustiness.

Sometime toward morning Meissner awoke. Coolness had crept into the house and he was too uncomfortable to go back to sleep. Through the window at his head he saw the first light of breaking dawn.

He rose and rubbed his body vigorously to bring warmth back into the flesh. Then he left the bedroom, went through the dining room, and up the stairway to the second floor.

In one of the clothes-closets off the hall he found a shirt, a pair of trousers — slightly too large for him — and shoes. There were no stockings but the pants came down low on his legs and probably

no one would notice. In one of the trouser pockets he found a half-dollar. This was an unexpected bit of luck and, for a moment, it lifted the black depression that still rode his spirits like a cloak.

When his grandfather had died, Meissner remembered, the house had been left pretty much as it was for almost a year. Now and then some one of his children — all of them married — would drop in and pick up something he wanted. But it was a year before the house was completely cleaned out and sold.

Meissner waited until broad daylight before venturing outside. He had not walked far before he recognized two men coming toward him.

"Good morning, Mr. van Remortal. And Mr. Plucker," Meissner said, as they met.

The men looked at him in surprise and grunted noncommittal replies. This would never do, Meissner reflected. Too much familiarity with his surroundings could easily lead to trouble. He must keep his identity secret at all costs.

At the Busy Bee Meissner had wheat cakes and coffee. He took his time eating them, waiting for the business district of the small town to come to life. In the meantime he glanced at the calendar and verified the date. July 8, 1933. Becker had done a good job in figuring when he would appear

again in his trip into the past. He should be in time to save Norbert Kerl's life.

At a quarter to nine he left the Busy Bee and walked over to the school grounds. And now the first excitement of expectation ran through him like a live current — but mingled with it was the ever-present dread. He wished he could put his finger on the reason for that dread.

In a few minutes he should be able to see himself as he had been twenty years earlier. What would his sensations be as he watched himself playing in the school yard?

Most of the children were already out on the grounds, playing a game called pump-pump-pull-away. He had almost forgotten that game, but it had been very popular in his youth.

For five minutes Meissner watched, but saw no signs of his former self. However, he recognized one of the smaller boys as Norbert Kerl.

Primarily, he had come back out of scientific curiosity, to see if the medium he and Becker had devised would work. However, in picking a date he had decided on July 8, 1933. That was the date young Kerl had drowned in the old stone pit. And, incidental as it was to the main purpose of his journey, Meissner wanted to prevent that tragedy, if at all possi-

ble.

He did not know how long it would be before he snapped back into the future. Perhaps he would not have time to prevent Kerl from going to the swimming hole, so he decided to scare him away somehow. He walked nearer to where the boys were playing. "Norbert," he called, "will you come here a minute?"

"Yeah?" Kerl asked as he ran over.

"How's the water in the old swimming hole?" Meissner asked.

"Pretty good," Kerl answered, looking at him questioningly.

"I was over there the other day," Meissner said. "And I saw a mother copperhead with fourteen young ones swimming around. That's going to be a dangerous place to swim for awhile."

"Copperheads?" Kerl asked. "They're poison, ain't they?"

"A bite from one of them will kill you in ten minutes," Meissner told him. "I wouldn't go near there for a long time if I were you."

"I won't," Kerl said. "Thanks." He shifted his feet uncomfortably. "I got to go back and play now."

"Just a minute," Meissner said, before Kerl could leave. "Where is little Art Meissner now? I don't see him playing."

"I don't know him."

"Oh, sure you do," Meissner said. "He's about your size. Dark hair. You play with him a lot."

"There ain't no kid here by that name," Kerl answered. He ran back to the other children.

No kid here by that name! The dreariness that had been gnawing at Meissner's vitals became a cry of agony. He remembered the school, and the children — though he had forgotten most of their names — and everything he saw around him. He, in his youth, had to be there somewhere. He decided to take the risk of talking to his old teacher.

"Miss Gallagher," Meissner said, "I'm looking for a boy by the name of Arthur Meissner. I understand he's in your class."

"No, I'm afraid not," Miss Gallagher replied. "There's no boy by that name in school. There is a George Meissner in the eighth grade; but he has no brothers."

George Meissner was his older brother. The feeling was worse now. She had said that George had no brothers. That wasn't possible.

"Well, thank —" the words caught in Meissner's throat and he turned and stumbled blindly out of the room.

Something was wrong here — terribly wrong. But he had to be absolutely certain that he was making no mistake. He started determinedly down the street.

At the end of three blocks Meissner came to the large, square house where he had lived as a boy. His mother should be home now.

It wouldn't do to blurt out that he had come from the future and that he was her son, he decided. Especially now that there was a mystery here that he must clear up. He'd have to think up some plausible story to use while he talked to her. He rang the bell.

"Yes?" The woman who answered was younger than Meissner had remembered. She was younger than he. Yet, she was unmistakably his mother. Her face and figure already bore the signs of hard work's molding. She had always worked hard, he remembered.

"I'm Mr. Anderson," Meissner said. "I've been hired by the board of education to conduct a survey of parents with children in school. You have two, have you not, Mrs. Meissner?"

"I have only one child," the woman said, drying her hands on the dish towel she carried. "His name is George, and he's in the eighth grade."

The crying inside became worse and Meissner could no longer hold it inside. "Mother," he cried, "don't you recognize me? I'm your son!"

The woman looked alarmed, and instantly Meissner realized how grave a misstep he had made. Here he was, a man older than she, claiming to be her son. "I'm afraid I can't talk any longer," the woman said. She was clearly frightened now.

"Please, just one more question," Meissner begged. "You're positive that you do not have a son by the name of Arthur?"

"Yes," she said and closed the door quickly.

Meissner spent the afternoon at the old swimming hole. He did not think it wise to remain around town. Probably by now his mother had spread an alarm about a queer-acting man. The townspeople would undoubtedly think him insane. Perhaps they would even arrest him. Further, he wanted to be certain that young Kerl did not visit the swimming hole that day. As he remembered, Kerl had drowned at about four-thirty in the afternoon.

The day was warm and Meissner lay in the cool shade of a willow tree. Overhead a bird chirped cheerfully, and Meissner knew that ordinarily he should have felt peaceful and relaxed on a day like this. But his nerves were taut as stretched wires, and his emotions were those of a man sentenced to die. All day long a dog howled dismally off in the distance.

When dusk came Meissner knew that at least he had managed to prevent Kerl's drowning — on that day anyway. He started back for his grandfather's house.

Becker had estimated that Meissner would spend about twenty-four hours in past time

before he snapped back into the future. His analogy had been that it would be like a rubber band, snapping twenty years into the past, where it would pause — for the time he would be able to spend there — before it began its return journey. Becker had not been able to estimate it exactly.

Meissner opened the door of his grandfather's house and felt himself snatched as in a giant hand and whisked out of time and space.

When Meissner returned he found himself standing in the dim light of early dawn. But where was Becker, he wondered. Becker was supposed to be waiting for him. And when he was not able to be here, he was to have left a change of clothing for Meissner. There was none to be seen.

Becker had not been able to estimate the exact time he would return. He had only been able to conclude that it would be a bit beyond the time Meissner had started. His rubber band would snap him back and its momentum would carry him a bit beyond his original starting point. Probably about a week into the future. That would give Becker plenty of time to make arrangements for his return. But there was no one here.

Perhaps Becker had underestimated the time, Meissner thought. Or perhaps he had returned to a time before he started. But then he would have met him-

self again before he left. More likely Becker had miscalculated and he had gone farther into the future than Becker had judged. But even so Becker should be waiting, or he should have left some sign that Meissner would recognize.

Meissner shrugged. Whatever the explanation, he couldn't afford to be caught here without clothes. He turned down an alley that ran to his left. A third of the way down the alley he saw a shirt and a pair of overalls hanging on a line. Slipping into the back yard, Meissner pulled the clothes off the line and put them on.

He was just fastening the last button on the shirt when he heard the clink of milk bottles. Then a shout. "What are you doing there?" a man's sleepy voice called. Meissner ran, but the man followed, shouting, "Stop! Come back with those clothes!"

Meissner increased his pace. He'd begun to outdistance the man when he stubbed his bare toe on a rock and fell.

His hands scraped along the cinders, and one knee tore through the leg of the overalls. He almost lost out then, but he climbed quickly to his feet and sprinted around the corner.

Meissner knew now where he'd go to hide. The Chicago and Minneapolis railroad tracks ran through a gully about six blocks away. The sides of the gully were

overgrown with Indian coffee bushes and weeds. Meissner had lost his pursuer now. At least he heard no sounds of him.

Once down in the gully, he crawled into the thickest bushes and lay down.

He was more tired than he had suspected; and he was thirsty, but he dared not leave. The man from whom he had stolen the clothing might still be looking for him. Soon sleep swept away his troubles and he dozed for the remainder of the forenoon.

Sometime during the afternoon Meissner awoke and his mouth was pinched with a tight and dry sourness. His whole body ached and protested against his every move. He placed the back of his hand against his forehead and it was hot and feverish. He knew he had to have food and water soon.

It should be safe to venture out now, he decided. If the man — or the police — were looking for him, and caught him, he could call Becker. There would be some explanations necessary, but probably no great danger of detention.

"Good God, don't tell me you don't know me either?"

"I'm sorry, sir," Doctor Becker said, "but to the best of my knowledge I've never seen you before in my life."

"But you must have!" Meissner's voice was high and unsteady. "I'm Arthur Meissner. You and I

discovered the secret of travelling in time! I went back to my childhood, and now I've returned. You must remember me!"

"Are you sure that you feel well?"

"Of course I do," Meissner exclaimed. "Why won't you admit that you know me? You're like the others in the past. They insisted that nobody like me had ever lived there. Even my mother denied me." His voice lost its tenseness and sank to a gray hopelessness. "Now, if you don't know me, I don't know what I'll do." His knees trembled, and he leaned his hand against the door for support. A flash of fever coursed through his body and burned into his eyes.

"If there's something I can do . . ."

"No, it seems not," Meissner said tonelessly. He turned to go, but his knees sagged slowly beneath him and he slumped to the doorstep.

"At last you've come around," Becker said. "I was a bit worried about you." He felt Meissner's wrist. "Your pulse has slowed down some, but your fever is as high as ever. I fail to find evidence of anything wrong with you, though, except for the scratches on your knees and hands."

Meissner spoke eagerly. "Tell me, Doctor," he said, "and please — please don't joke. You do re-

member me, don't you?"

Becker shook his head.

"But then, what's happened to me? Why doesn't anybody know me?"

"Take this sedative, please," Becker said. "You need more rest. After you sleep we'll talk again."

This time when Meissner awoke he felt better, and his head was clear. His fever still burned, but it did not affect his thinking.

Becker must have heard him moving, for he entered the bedroom almost immediately. "How are you feeling now?" he asked.

"Some better, I guess," Meissner replied. "I suppose you think I'm crazy?"

"No. But your high fever has induced some strange hallucinations. I hope you've managed to rid yourself of them."

"Doctor," Meissner said earnestly, "I want you to do me a favor. Just pretend — at least until I've told you my story — that you don't think I'm crazy or have hallucinations. Think and act as if what I'm going to tell you could have happened. Will you do that?"

"Of course," Becker answered. "Go right ahead."

"All right. To start with, my name is Arthur Meissner. Six years ago I met a man by the name of Walter Becker. This was not a coincidence. Becker was a physicist; one of the best in the

country. I, on the other hand, was an amateur, working along unusual lines of somatology. The story is long, but its essential feature is that I had an idea for building a time machine and, with Becker's help and scientific knowledge, succeeded.

"I went back twenty years into time, to my youth. And when I arrived I found that I had never existed there—even though I remembered everything I saw. Now, when I return here, I find that you know nothing about me, or our experiments. Can you possibly give me any explanation?"

Becker was silent for a long moment. Then he said, "The Becker you refer to, I presume, is supposed to be me. You say that he was a famous physicist. I am a medical doctor! So, if I were to grant that your story is true, are you certain that I'm the man you're looking for?"

"Positive. You're not only identical, but you live in this same house. I've spent many hours with you, working in your laboratory in the basement."

"I have a woodshop in the basement," Becker said, "but no laboratory.

"I have thought over everything you told me," Becker said. "I've considered it objectively, as you asked. Strangely enough, I believe you. Or at least I'm convinced that you're sincere. Why don't you bathe and shave, if you

feel well enough, and after you're through we can talk again."

"A good idea." Messiner rose and walked into the bathroom. He looked into the looking glass and was startled at his reflection. His bitter experience had done ghastly things to him. He would hardly have recognized himself. His face seemed bloated and puffed, his brows were heavier, and his whiskers were black and tough as steel barbs. He shaved with difficulty. But after it was over he did feel better.

"Now," Becker said, after they'd seated themselves, "acting on the assumption that your story is true, I've arrived at an answer to the mystery of what happened to you. Naturally, I can give you no assurance that it is the correct one, but it is an explanation, and may help you get peace of mind, if nothing else."

Meissner sat up straighter. "Go ahead," he said.

"Nature," Becker continued, "has certain immutable laws which cannot be defied with impunity. True, science is finding new truths every day, and finding that the old accepted beliefs are wrong. However," Becker paused while he searched for the exact words he wanted, "certain truths and laws are inviolable by their own intrinsic necessity. To use an example, you've probably heard the old saw about what happens

when an irresistible force strikes an immovable object. Theoretically at least, it is possible to have an irresistible force. And it is just as possible to have an immovable object. But it is not possible to have both. If the force is irresistible, it will move any object. If, on the other hand, the object is immovable, no force will be able to move it.

"Another immutable law of nature is this: No two objects can occupy the same space at the same time. You may have heard that stated before?"

"I believe I have," Meissner answered. "But what does that have to do with what's happened to me?"

"I'm coming to that," Becker said. "If you travelled backward in time as you claim, you attempted to violate a law of nature which may be regarded as a corollary of the axiom that no two bodies can occupy the same space at the same time. The one you violated is one so self-evident that it's probably never been defined by an axiom. It may be stated as: no object, undivided, can occupy more than one unit of space at one time."

"Are you trying to tell me that I could not exist — at the same time — both as a youth and as an adult?"

"Yes," Becker answered. "You see, you yourself are the object in this particular instance, and by

going back into time you — the same object — would be occupying two separate units of space at the same time. Which is axiomatically impossible. Therefore, nature made its adjustment; the same as it would if an irresistible force hit a so-called immovable object. It eliminates one of them. It did the same when it eliminated your past."

"I see, rather vaguely, what you mean," Meissner said. "But why, then, don't you remember me, now that I'm back?"

"But don't you see, the things you expect me to remember about you also happened in your past, and you wiped out all that by your violation of one of nature's precepts. Therefore, the things you remember about your contacts with me never happened either."

"But then how can I be here at all? I shouldn't exist if I have no past."

"That," Becker said gravely, "has given me a great deal of thought. And I dread to put into words the conclusion I came to. I pray that I'm wrong."

That evening when Meissner entered the bathroom and looked into the mirror his reflection was awe-inspiring. The swelling in his face had puffed up his lips, and spread his nostrils, giving a flattened, apelike cast to his features. His beard had grown in surpris-

ingly fast; the whiskers had crept up closer to his eyes and down his neck until there was no break between the whisker line and the long hair on his chest. His eyebrows were heavier and longer, and his forehead appeared narrower.

The grimace he gave at the sight of his reflection drew his thick lips back into a snarl, and his eyeteeth stood out like fangs. His expression was entirely brutish.

That night Meissner was tossed by the fever and his whole body became one twitching, itching torment. He scratched continuously until he was sore and raw-fleshed in a dozen places.

When he could stand the misery no longer, he attempted to call to Becker. But his lips and tongue refused to form words, as though dulled by long disuse. At last he forced out a shout. "Becker! Becker!" he called hoarsely. "Help me!"

Becker entered at his second call, drawing his bathrobe about him. He looked at Meissner with grave concern, but without surprise.

"Can't you stop this god-awful itching?" Meissner asked. "It's driving me mad. I can't stand much more of it."

"I'll do what I can," Becker said. He went into the bathroom and returned quickly with a jar of ointment. "Can you take your

pajamas off by yourself?" he asked.

"I think so," Meissner answered. As he pulled his pajama top over his head Meissner looked down at his bare body. The skin was coarse tissued, gray and dead looking — except the patches of raw red flesh which he had scratched bare. When he touched the skin he felt a morbid chill — and yet it was dry and flaky.

"What's happened to me, Becker?" he asked, turning his bloodshot eyes up to the doctor. Suddenly, self-pity overcame him and he started to cry.

Obviously embarrassed, Becker did not speak. He avoided meeting Meissner's pleading, tearful look.

"For God's sake, if you know, tell me!" Meissner cried.

Becker drew in a deep breath. "I think I do know, Arthur," he said slowly. "Do you really want me to tell you?"

Meissner nodded, his voice muted by what he read in Becker's expression.

"Is your mind clear enough to understand everything I say?" Becker asked.

"It's not too clear," Meissner answered. "Things keep coming and going. Sometimes I'm not even sure who I am, or what I'm doing here."

"Do you remember the last time we talked — when you asked how you could exist at all if you



were a man without a past?"

"Yes, I remember that."

"Then I think you should have an explanation; at least what I believe it is. To give you this answer, I will have to be brutally frank. Maybe I'm wrong to tell you, but in all fairness, if you want it you shall have it."

Fear crawled along Meissner's skin like a live thing. He did not know what was coming, but he realized that whatever it was it would be terrible to hear. He stared at Becker with a helpless appeal, but said nothing.

"In past ages," Becker said, "inanimate matter in some way became impregnated with life force, and through the eons it moved, through its slow evolutionary process, to its present stage of development. The crux of your whole difficulty is that, according to nature, you should not be existing now, as you have no past, and therefore are not a result of that evolutionary process. You constitute a contradiction which must be remedied. It is moving now to eliminate the error you represent — by sending you back through that evolutionary process.

"If you remember, the last time you looked into a mirror your features were hairy and bestial. Now the hair has started to leave your body, and scales are taking its place. The twitching

and itching you feel on your skin is due to its cellular change."

Once again Becker paused and gazed pityingly at the man before him. "I know this is an awful thing to tell you," he said, "but, as I mentioned before, I believe you are entitled to hear it. Lord knows it cannot make your difficulty much worse than it is now."

Despite the shock of the doctor's words, small segments of reason still clung to Meissner's brain. "But that evolutionary process took millions of years. If what you say is true, why is the reverse going so swiftly?"

"Nature is hurrying to rectify its disorder. You are not only returning quickly, but I am certain that the rate of retrogression is one of a geometrically, rather than an arithmetically, increasing rate. In other words, if you started going back at the rate of — say, two thousand years a minute — the second minute you returned at the rate of four thousand years a minute; the third minute, eight thousand; the fourth, sixteen thousand; and so on. That's why I believe you do not have much longer to live. I wish to heaven there was some way I could help you. But I am powerless."

The sickness that had been gathering in Meissner's throat rose up and engulfed him in a great black mass of unconsciousness.

Sometime later awareness re-

turned to Meissner's conscious mind, spurred by the immediacy of a desire — a need — that could not be denied. He had to have water!

Arising from his bed he staggered into the bathroom and filled the wash bowl with water from its cold faucet. He buried his bald, gray, scaly head in the water and gulped in great swallows of the precious liquid.

But still his need was not satisfied. Straightening up from the bowl he let his myopic gaze wander about the room, until it rested on the bathtub. For a long moment he regarded it before the logic of its function became evident. Then he turned on both faucets of the tub, and crawled in. He did not remove the clothing he wore.

The warm water embosomed Meissner's throbbing body, and he felt a soft glow of tranquillity — his first peace and satisfaction since the start of his horrible ordeal. For short periods he immersed his head in the water, and while he held it there his limbs fluttered idly, with a placid quiescence. He was content.

With the contentment came a bestial cunning — and a bestial decision!

The thing that pulled itself from the tub bore little semblance to a human being. Its animal cunning directed it as it fumbled at

the catch on the medicine cabinet door — until it had solved the method of its opening.

It was quiet now. Quiet with the deceptive guile of a primitive thing. Among the bottles and implements in the medicine cabinet it found a pair of scissors. It clutched them like a dagger in its webbed hand and stood swaying slowly — back and forth.

During a long minute of indecision its gaze returned to the tub — with its lure of the water it needed — longingly. But its resolution returned to its stronger impulsion — revenge — and soon its purpose was once again firmly fixed in mind.

It did not know why it must do this: that it was caught in the grasp of a psychological compulsion stronger than its elementary reasoning power. It only knew that it associated its pain with the being who had explained its cause. As such it must kill that being.

Slowly it dragged its gross body across the bathroom floor and out the door.

The evolutionary change in its tissues was an agonizing thing now. Its outer wrapping no longer merely twitched and itched. Rather, it writhed and cracked with the terrible abruptness of its structural changes. Blood ran sluggishly from the raw breaks in its lacerated flesh.

At the doorway to Becker's room it leaned against the doorframe, gathering its rudimentary wits, while the counter-evolutionary process coursed with lightning speed through its tissues. Only one spark of reason burned: it must kill! It must plunge its daggerlike shears into the form that breathed on the bed before it.

It attempted to step forward, but during its long pause the lower appendages on its carcass

had joined and now formed one solid extension of its trunk. It could no longer walk!

It fell, face forward.

The sound of its fall startled Becker into an upright position. He reached up and snapped on his light. At the foot of his bed, something struggled and made moist, suckling sounds with its mouth. Becker looked down.

"My God!" he said. The thing that lay on the floor inched painfully toward him. It twisted and crawled. And twisted and crawled. And twisted . . .

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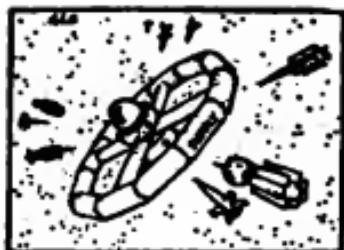
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James L. Young,
Manhattan, Kansas



"I now earn three and a half times my former pay"

Robert Fisher,
Mo. (Omaha, Ark.)



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